Faery Tales, Mermaid Myths, and Other Fantastical Legends
Vol. 3

Alexa Asagi Andres

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Dedicated to my amazing mother, Darla Andres, who has always helped inspire me, support me, humor me, and most importantly create with me, she has always been there for me as a writer, a mother, a helper of my GAD/SPD and most importantly my friend

I also dedicate this book to my grandmother, Gloria Davis, who has been my second biggest supporter, a driving force in my life encouraging me to write, to publish and to go wherever my heart takes me

Thank you to you both for being the women you are and for tuning out all of the unstrange people who have criticized you for it, thank you for believing that strangeness- difference- is not wrongness as most people believe

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Bonus thanks to my most loyal supporters, Stevie, Jamie, Branda, and Marie- I can always count on you for a conversation, a read, and a smile, thank you for adding so much to my life, hugs and werewolf cuddles to anyone who picks up my books, know that any smile they give you gives me a smile right back!

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Several of these tales were written either in honor of, or at request of, real humans

The following feature appearances by:

The Absence Of Cats -- Stevie Turner

The Christmas Cat -- Darla Andres

The Christmas Wolf -- Darla Andres

The Dancing Wolf Pack -- Raven Martin

The Exotic Pet Rescue -- Sarah McSwain

The Fix-It Phoenix -- Nicole Long

The Forest Elf -- Alice Baltar

The Gold And Silver Seashell -- Riley, Gil, and Liev Chapa

The Helpful Mermaid -- Nicole Lawrence

The Kind Dragon -- Amber Johnson

The Princess Of Bookdale -- Rebecca Stewart

The Very Special Vet -- Laurie Burkhalter

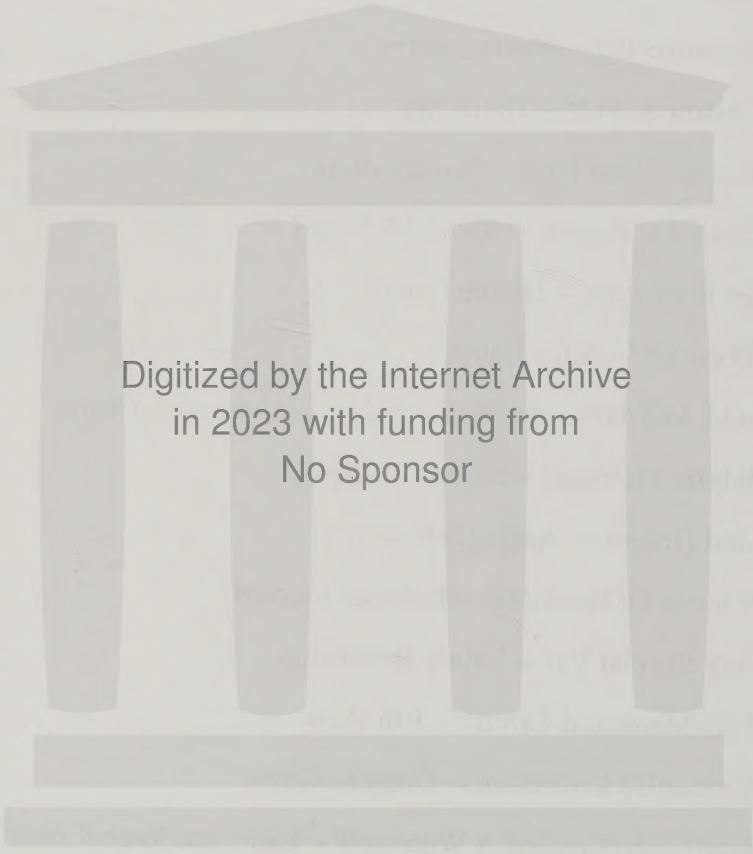
The Well-Mannered Tanuki -- Bill Perry

The Werewolf's Collection -- Gregory Grillo

The Witch Who Created A Werewolf -- Larry and Rachel Aber

The Wolf Run -- Darla Andres

On second thought, are they really fully human after all??



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Alexa Asagi Andres

The Absence Of Cats

Once upon a time

In a world quite plain and boring

There lived a girl by the name of Stevie

Stevie was a very special girl, for she was not at all plain and boring like the rest of the world

Whereas this world was grey-scale and full of sepia shades, Stevie was a magnificent color scheme full of rainbow shades

But as one can probably imagine, it wasn't at all easy being the only colorful thing in a world surrounded by nothing but black and white

This is why she surrounded herself with the most peculiar friends she could find: Cats

Cats never did conform to anything you see, no matter what world they live in they simply must do the opposite of whatever is socially acceptable

So cats were really the closest Stevie had to other beings of bright dashes of color like herself

There was however, a problem with the cats

For you see they often liked to abscond off on adventures without consulting Stevie first, which has led to some terrible troubles in the past

And it didn't seem that those days would be ending any time soon at all

For it was one day, when Stevie was busy redecorating one of her favorite rooms, that she turned to consult the cats and found... that they were gone

She tried to call out for them of course, but it was no use

Turning back to the window she had been working on, she glanced out and saw none other than her cats walking down the pavement

"Now where on earth could they be going?" she asked herself, immediately grabbing a shawl to keep the cold away and rushing outside to catch up with them

However, she didn't make it in time to actually catch them, only long enough to see a familiar looking tail go around a corner, into a heavily wooded area that Stevie herself stayed out of

The woods, she had always been told, were a dangerous place, and it was better to leave them unexplored

But there was nothing Stevie wouldn't do for her cats, and so she followed the tail, into the forest and past a large domain of trees

The section of trees was so large and so full of leaves that it blotted out the sun for a few steps, and when she emerged, she found that she was no longer in the same forest

She couldn't be

For the sky was pitch black like the night, and the trees- rather than growing leaves- were sporting stars

"Not on earth at all then," she observed

Walking up to one of the trees, she stared up and felt herself smiling

She had never seen a tree full of stars before

Carefully, she reached out towards one of the stars, only to hear a shout just ahead of her

"Nope! Nope nope nope! You shouldn't touch those!" came the voice

With a frown, Stevie turned around and saw a rather strange looking man coming her way, he had a handlebar mustache with curls that would make Shirley Temple jealous, a top hat with a set of flyer goggles on it, overalls and gloves and a long braided ponytail, his hair was a bright

shade of ginger and he had little shards of metal embedded in what appeared to be random places in his skin

"Why not?" Stevie asked in disappointment

"Well because you'll burn up o'course! Don't you know a single thing about star-pickin'?"

"No... no I'm afraid not,"

"Well you do it like that an' the star'll burn right through ya'! Ya' gotta be wearin' star-proof clothes there Miss Lady Girl!"

"Stevie," she corrected

"A-what now?"'

"Stevie, it's my name,"

The man seemed perplexed by this as he walked closer, grumbling to himself under his breath

"Odd sorta name there ... that Stevie is it... never heard the likes o' that one before... let's see here now... oh forgive me, my name's Busher, how are your skies?"

Stevie just smiled pleasantly, for she was always a pleasant person, and held her hand out for Busher

"My skies are lovely, and yours?"

"Well they're a bit too sunny for my taste but it's alright... hm..." he stared at her hand strangely for a moment before reaching into his pocket and setting a candle in her hand

"You're supposed to shake it," Stevie laughed

Busher seemed to be growing in his confusion but with a bit of hesitation he reached out, took the candle back, and gave it a few hard shakes at the sky before setting it back in Stevie's open hand

"... Never mind," she said with a laugh

"Well aren't you a strange one?" he mused

"Now about those star-pickin' clothes, you still wanna give it a go?"

"Of course!" Stevie replied with a bright smile, finding a pocket in her skirt and stuffing the candle in- it was a souvenir you could say, of this strange and wonderful world she was visiting, and Stevie always treated little souvenirs like this like absolute treasures

"Alright now... get ready for some magic here... we can do this, ol' reliable..." Busher seemed to mutter to himself, stretching and doing a few yoga poses before clapping his hands together and giving them a sure rub

Bringing his hands apart, he clapped them together once again and Stevie could feel something about her clothes changing

When she looked down, she found herself in a beautiful Victorian blue dress with white ruffles and little white gloves

"Oh!! I look like Alice!" she cried excitedly

"Why I'll say, I reckon you look like a lass because you are one," Busher commented

"Oh, no no, AL-ICE,"

"AL-ICE? What in the waffle cup is an AL-ICE?"

"You don't know Alice? From Wonderland?"

Busher shook his head slowly, sucking on his teeth

"We don't get many visitors here," he explained

"Oh, then I simply must tell you!" Stevie insisted, glancing at the tree and smiling brightly

"But first...." she leaned up on the tips of her toes, reaching out and plucking a star from the tree

It was warm, not hot, but warm, like clothes right out of the dryer

She supposed she could see how this could burn someone... but regardless, she stuffed the star in her purse and turned toward Busher

"I'm looking for my cats, have you seen them?"

"Cat? Well sure, I saw a couple of cats just a second ago."

"Excellent! Then you can help me find them!"

"Why certainly," Busher replied with a nod

"And on the way there I can tell you all about Alice."

And she did

Throughout the journey down the forest she explained as much to him about Alice In Wonderland as she perfectly could, and only stopped when it was only necessary

"My goodness... that's a lot of information, interesting but a lot," Busher mused, stopping suddenly

"Why did we stop?" Stevie asked in confusion as she glanced over her shoulder at him

"We have to wait," Busher explained, holding a hand out to her

Stevie looked a little closer and stared on in confusion as she stared at two people standing in the middle of their pathway, both of them standing completely still, so still that they didn't even seem real, especially with the unrealistic, doll-like, almost robotic pose they held

She glanced around, her eyes catching a crank much like the one you would find on a music box in a nearby tree and she stepped closer, grasping on with both hands and giving it a few sturdy turns before stepping back

Surely enough, a second after she let go the crank began to turn and music began playing throughout the forest

Even more amazingly, however, the two people in front of her- one a lady, in a beautiful Victorian dress, the other a man in a suit- began to move as well

Their movements were robotic and unreal and yet they also danced with such a smoothness and gracefulness to them...

"They do this every afternoon, come to life for a few minutes to profess their love for each other," Busher noted as the doll-people danced in front of them

It was a beautiful waltz and the music told of two lovers who fall in love at first sight, and yet remain in love for eternity

And Stevie couldn't help but be utterly enthralled by what she was seeing

However, in no time at all, things began to slow, the crank coming to a stop, the music abruptly halting, and the doll-people remaining frozen in time with the male's arm around the female's waist, as if a final protective and affectionate gesture

"Can't we crank them up again?" Stevie asked as they walked through the trees again

"No no, we wouldn't want to do that,"

"Why not?"

"Stress, the more stress that crank gets the more difficult it is to turn and then what happens? We wouldn't want them to break,"

She supposed she could understand that...

"Would you like a dream?" she heard, turning suddenly and seeing a woman in a flamenco dress and a masquerade mask standing suspiciously behind her, swaying slowly in place and holding up a bird cage filled with butterflies

"What for?" Stevie asked curiously

"To dream of course," the flamenco dancer explained

"Oh! No no, we don't want any of that business," Busher said quickly, taking Stevie's hand and pulling her away

"Why don't we want any of her business?"

"Because her 'dreams' have a tendency to become reality, now just imagine if you were to get a bad one," he pointed out

That was true she supposed....

"You have a good point, where are we going now?" she asked

"Ah well if I recall correctly I saw your cats swing just around the Sylph Field, so we'll need to go straight through the Hillberry Mountain to get there,"

Stevie didn't even try to get a proper translation of any of that, she was just enjoying the ride of it all

So she followed Busher as he instructed her to, through the trees and past some rivers, and when they finally passed through the forest and into a large clearing, she came across one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen

It seemed that there was a tea party going on

And what an exceptional tea party it was

There were Fae Folk of all kinds around

Faeries playing music and dancing, merfolk laying against the river and bathing in the sun, elves in trees and nymphs laying sensually against each other in their chairs

There were rabbits making tea and deer serving pie

Fauns adding berries to cake and centaurs lounging in corners

There were wolves dressed in tuxedos and sitting at the table and there were tigers in ball gowns doing just the same

There were bears and boars and butterflies

There were dogs and deer and Dodo birds

There were foxes and ferrets and frogs

There were birds singing songs and serving sugar cubes

There were rats dancing in people's hats and ferrets picking flowers to create lovely bouquets

There were vampires leaning under the shade of umbrellas and sipping on blood wine and there were werewolves laying on the table feeding each other grapes

There were lions feeding berries to lambs and there were seal-folk and shark-folk basking in the same water

Kitsune and nagual braiding each other's hair and ravens bringing daisies to coyotes

Wolves and foxes licking honey from each other's paws

The world was so full of bright and brilliant colors that Stevie didn't know what to do, where to go, or how to adapt first

But there was something she noticed as she watched this strange menagerie of a tea party

There was an odd absence of cats

All around her, all of the animals and all of the Fae Folk and odd creatures and yet there wasn't a single cat

"Wouldn't you like to stay for tea?" asked a faery woman- as if sensing her hesitation- as she danced by and placed her hands on Stevie's shoulders

"I have to find my cats," she explained

The faery seemed amused by this and she swayed closer to the other faery she had been dancing with

"Hey, she's looking for the cats," she mentioned

"The cats?"

"The cats," echoed an elf from behind them

"Should we tell her?"

"Where are the cats?"

"There aren't many cats,"

"But there are plenty cats,"

"She wants to find the cats,"

The murmurs of her journey seemed to spread all across the clearing as each and every creature gradually gave their attention over to her

"Sure, we'll show you the cats," hummed a fox as she licked the remnants of honey from her paw and jumped down from the tea table

"Just follow me,"

Stevie was almost hesitant, but she was more of an adventurer than that and so she followed without question

The fox lead her toward the other side of the woods and there, surely enough, was a large section of the forest inhabited entirely by cats

"What are you all doing back here?" she asked, feeling a wave of relief when her own cats immediately leapt down from their trees and came to snuggle up against her legs

"Why we're hosting a party," replied a massive black cat as she stalked forward

"You're hosting it? But you aren't there," Stevie replied in confusion

The cat tsked, shaking her head and sitting down in front of Stevie

"Dear child do you really think all of these creatures could get on with each other so well on nature alone? Something has to give them a little boost to descend into madness,"

"Madness? Why that looks like happiness to me,"

"It is, for a time, for as long as the smoke hangs in the air," she replied

"Smoke?" Stevie asked in confusion

"Do you know why we have the tea parties in this clearing? Because it's hard to find and almost impossible to interrupt, yes, but also because the air here is the purest, people can breathe and get more oxygen than they can anywhere else, it can be a little intoxicating, and when you add a little intoxicant... well..."

"Intoxicant?"

Well that certainly made sense for why the tea party seemed so.... friendly.... but she couldn't imagine what the cats had to do with that

"Different creatures are immune to different things, but one thing we've found always seems to hold true is cat claws, haven't you heard of Cat Scratch Fever? Just to dabble our claws in the water of that humidifier over there tends to... ease tension," she explained, licking her paw peacefully

"You're making them hallucinate?" Stevie asked cautiously

"Dear Heavens no, our claws aren't THAT strong, so watered down, it just relaxes them, you might think it strange being from your world but where humans aren't so different, how else could all of us get along so well in our right minds?" the cat teased with a smirk

"That's why my cats came here then? To help this... peace day?"

"You are correct, they didn't expect you to follow,"

Stevie smiled, looking down and kissing the cats on top of their heads

"You are welcome to stay if you so wish, this land is meant to be of peace, not of harm, we have many scary things but none that will hurt you, and you're always more than welcome at the tea party,"

Stevie thought about that for a long moment, reflecting back to the star trees and the colors and the tea party, and she smiled as she adjusted her bag on her arm

"I think I will stay," she replied with a bright smile, always up for an adventure, always up to explore, and always up to have more color in her life

Although, perhaps for now at least, she may avoid those tea parties....

The Baker's Choice

Once upon a time

In a land ruled by a powerful monarchy

There lived a simple baker

And this baker wanted one thing and one thing alone

To have a family with the woman he loved

This didn't seem like such a big thing to ask for, after all the woman he loved was a seamstress

A simple seamstress and nothing more

She was not highborn, she came from no money or status, and she loved him back

What could possibly go wrong?

Well, quite a bit as it was

For you see the baker was not JUST a baker

He was an exceptionally GOOD baker, the best in all the land some might argue

And when someone is that good at what they do, people are bound to notice

Important people are bound to notice

And the princess indeed took notice

The princess of the land was always known for having a very strong sweet tooth and the baker's treats were like no other in the land

Soft, warm, gooey, and oh-so-good

It took exactly one time of the princess sampling them before she declared that she was to have this baker all to herself- or, mostly to herself at least- and requested he be brought to her to become the new palace baker

The baker was thrilled to get the news, of course, and the first person he told about his impending meeting was none other than his true love, the seamstress

"Oh Sam that's wonderful! Simply marvelous!" she cried excitedly, giving him a big, happy hug

"I'm meeting with the princess officially tomorrow, it won't be long now, I promise, we'll be living a life of luxury soon," he said with an excited smile, hugging his love back just as strongly and tightly

And although the two of them felt excited and confident in the news, it would only last one night

For the next day instead of being delivered GOOD news... the baker was given an ultimatum

"I really can't thank you enough for this your majesty," the baker said with an ecstatic smile

"Oh please, don't worry about being so formal, Princess Elanore will do," she said with a shrug, clearly brushing off the formalities

"As you wish Princess Elanore."

The princess just gave a good-natured laugh, shaking her head

"Really don't be so nervous... but now that those pesky formalities are all squared away, I wonder if we could discuss your living arrangements,"

"Living arrangements?" The baker echoed

"Yes of course, I can't have you traveling here every morning from the outskirts of the city all the way to the palace, it's unreasonable, not to mention there's really no way I'd be able to get breakfast on time then...

so I was thinking that this could be a live-in position, as most of the staff here has," she suggested

"I... I would be honored Princess!" he said immediately

After all, WORKING in the palace was one thing, but LIVING in the palace... that was an entirely different entity all on its own

"Ohhh perfect!! Now I must ask, do you live alone? Or do you have family or perhaps a wife who we'll be bringing in as well?"

"Well I don't have any family I'm afraid, no wife either, however I do have someone who I hope will become my fiancé very, very soon,"

The princess looked utterly thrilled with that news, squealing and clapping with excitement

"Ohhh goodie!! I'm so happy for you!! And pray-tell, what's her- or his-name?" she asked

"Maggie," the baker answered, a purely dreamy look on his face as he spoke her name

"Maggie Elderidge, she's a seamstress in-"

"I know who she is," the princess cut in curtly, her demeanor changing at once from a perky, excitably individual to someone who was serious and rather ... upset.... with the sudden news

"Princess-?"

"Baker, I'm very impressed with your skill, you know that, however I will not have an Elderidge in my home, nor anywhere near it, you must choose, to have her... or to have this job, you are a kind, smart man Baker, and there will be plenty of other women in the future, especially if you work here at the palace, I could introduce you to some highborn girls and give my blessing... but a job like this comes ONLY once, if you deny this chance now you are denying it for good, I realize that this is blind-siding you so I shall give you one day to make your choice, return here before the sun sets tomorrow and give me your answer, will

you be my baker... or will you be her husband- IF she even will have you?"

The baker was in shock his entire way home, unable to even recall how he came back to his small cottage by the bakery or who escorted him there

The decision was ... it was brutal...

On the one hand baking for the palace had been his dream ever since he was a child and first started baking to begin with

That was WHY he started baking to begin with

The sometimes impossible sounding dream was suddenly sitting here, waiting for him at his feet

And it wasn't just that he so happened to end up there, no, the princess asked for him SPECIALLY

You couldn't get much bigger of an honor than that...

However...

Maggie was all he wanted in life

Maggie and children, to build the family he'd never had

He loved her, irrevocably, and he knew for a fact that he would never love anyone else, not even close in comparison to how he felt about her

Maggie was his entire world, his entire life, his soul was bound to her's

And he knew reasonably that he would never choose anything that would so much as risk taking Maggie away from him

But still, it was hard to reason with himself that he was giving up such an important job, and even more frustrating, he couldn't understand WHY

What did the princess have against Maggie?

She had seemed plenty excited for the prospect of him having a lover, so what was it about Maggie that set her off so coldly?

It was while he contemplated this that the door opened and the love of his life stepped in, a concerned look on her face as she took in the less than enthusiastic look on his face

"Sam, my darling, what's wrong?" she asked worriedly

He took a breath, considering that for a moment, considering the idea of lying to her

After all it might be more considerate to spare her feelings, he knew she wouldn't want to think that she was the reason he was going to give this up....

But he wanted to be honest with her

He wanted no lies between them, she deserved more than that

And so he told her, in detail, everything that had happened since he went to the palace that morning

He expected the pained look on her face when he finished speaking, but what he didn't expect was what she said next

"Sam, I won't force you to stay, but I can't ask you to go, you have to tell me in all honesty, will you ever regret this decision?"

That didn't require an ounce of thought, immediately he shook his head, staring at her with conviction

"No, I'll never regret this decision, not for a single moment," he swore

She took a breath, nodding her understanding quickly

"Good, then tomorrow morning I shall accompany you to the castle and we'll get this sorted straight away"

The baker stared at her with shock and confusion, mouth open and eyes wide

"Is that really such a good idea? Maggie, she doesn't want you there, why antagonize her?"

"Because, I know exactly what the princess' problem is with me and I intend to resolve it."

Now the baker was a smart man, he knew better than to argue with his possible fiancé

And it was in that moment, that moment of strength, that he made the decision he had been waiting all this time to make

"Maggie Elderidge, I know that you deserve better, that you deserve stability and a ring, and that's what I've been waiting for all this time but... I can't wait any longer, would you please do me the incredible honor of being my wife?"

And Maggie, being ever as in love with the baker as he was with her, said yes

The next morning when the baker and his fiancé went to the palace, he expected many things

To be screamed at, thrown out, exiled, or even beheaded...

But ever one to surprise him, what actually did happen was something completely different than all of those scenarios

"What is this madness!? I explicitly tell you I don't want her here and you bring her with you!?" the princess shouted in anger

"Elanor, please, don't get upset," Maggie said slowly, taking a cautious step forward

"Don't speak to me that way, you and I are not equals!"

"And I am also not the monster you think I am," the seamstress protested smoothly

"Monster? Maggie... what on earth are you talking about?" the baker asked in confusion

It was in that moment that a light of recognition flittered across the princess' face

"I see... I see that's it! You haven't told him yet! That's why he's choosing you! That's why he's sticking by you! He has no idea what a hideous beast you are!" the princess shouted

"Maggie... Maggie what is she talking about!?"

The baker's fiancé heaved a sigh, staring at him solemnly before taking several steps back

"I was going to tell you I swear it... I just never found the right time," she said quietly, stepping out of her shoes and taking a deep breath as a bright white glow began to engulf her, and when the glow faded away there was no longer a woman in her place

What was in her place instead, was a lamia

A half-woman, half-snake

Her waist down had become nothing but a serpent's tail, emerald green and shimmering in the sunlight that streamed through the windows

"I'm so sorry Sam," she said, her voice more of a hiss, a throaty whisper then

"I should have told you in the beginning but I was afraid... afraid you'd react the same way my old friend did,"

The baker was silent for a moment, gobsmacked by what was happening

"You and the princess-"

"We were friends," Maggie continued, slithering a bit closer and reaching out with a shaking hand for her fiancé

"We were friends until she found out the truth.... but once she did she hated me, banished me from the inner kingdom, she hatesssss snakes... and refused to see that I was more than that, that I am more than my body,"

The baker took Maggie's hand firmly in her own, and the seamstress waited solemnly for rejection

However, she was not the only one with surprises up her sleeve, for the baker did not reject the woman he loved

No, instead he stepped closer, cupping her face and giving her a chaste kiss

"I will always love you, no matter if you're a woman, or a serpent, or a fish, or a bug... it matters not, what matters is that you're YOU, and I LOVE you, no matter what vessel your soul is in it is still YOUR soul, and my soul is forever in love with yours,"

"Fool! You're a fool!" the princess shouted, standing from the throne and stampeding down toward them

"She's a monster! Can't you see that!?"

"With all due respect Princess, the only monster I see here is you," the baker shot back

The princess was stunned, so stunned that she couldn't even speak, and the baker decided not to risk his luck any further, taking his fiancé's hand and guiding her out of the palace

The two were content to live the way they had been for so long now, supporting themselves on bread and blouses and other things they could make with their hands

As long as they had each other, they figured, things were perfect just the way they were

At least, that was until they heard notice from the neighboring kingdom who had heard once again of the baker's fine food

And this time, just in case, he took the seamstress with him to meet with the princess

"So you're the famous baker and his fiancé the lamia?" the princess asked with a smirk, stepping down from her throne

In a sudden burst of light the princess arched her back, a set of beautiful golden brown wings springing from them as her nails grew out into talon-like claws and her wings gave a single flap to stretch out

"Mr. Baker, if you'll have us, I think you and your beautiful fiancé will come to enjoy it here,"

The Bear

Once upon a time

In another land

There was a legend about the Bear and how it was the most fearsome creature in all the world

Few people knew why, but they believed the legends as they came straight from the forest folk themselves

And what few people DID come to witness the almighty power of the Bear, they were sure to scream out the same sentiments, that there is nothing like the raw power of this beast

However, there were those few out there who didn't take heed of the stories...

One was a hunter who was known for taking out predators, lions, wolves, snakes, it didn't matter, he had hunted them all and kept their skins like trophies in his disgusting little home

And this hunter, too arrogant for his own good, decided to tackle the fearsome bear next

He ignored all the warnings and went into the forest where the Bear was rumored to be, and when he spotted an animal that matched the description- broad, thick brown fur, paws like hand-prints he assumed 'This must be the bear'

And to a point he was right, he did find a bear… just not THE bear…

Specifically, in fact, he found a bear CUB, but since he had never seen a bear before, he didn't know this and foolishly chased down the cub, cornering it in a cage and roughing it up a bit before pulling it out by the scruff of the neck

"You aren't such a frightening thing," he said as he held up the cub, taking a blade from his pocket with the intention of cutting off the bear cub's head

The cub was tired from abuse and could fight no more, so he did the only thing he could do in that moment, he cried-

"Mama!" he shouted, and before the hunter could remove the blade from the sheath, a deep, roaring rumble quaked through the trees, and the entire forest seemed to part as a massive beast thrice the size of the hunter stumped towards the pair

The Bear, who's head was as big as the hunter's chest, stood up on her hind legs and towered over the two of them, and when she saw what had happened to her cub, she became angry

"What have you done to my child?" she bellowed, so loudly and deeply that the birds flew from the trees

The hunter, not knowing what else to do, dropped the cub to the ground and made a run for it

But the mother bear was undeterred

She did not forgive so easily, the bear checked her cub for any mortal wounds and pushed him aside to the safest den, and within only a few steps she caught up to the many yards the hunter had already run, cornering him

She stood up on her hind legs again and roared with conviction, so much so that it blew the hunter's hair straight off his face

When he stared up at the mother bear, legend tells us, he saw something that struck fear in him more than any predator ever had, more than any teeth or claws, he saw determination

"I will leave you alone!" he claimed

"Why don't you let me go?"

The Bear stared down at him and after a long moment of silence she began to laugh, a deep, guttural laugh that shook the very ground they stood on

"You tell a good joke, human hunter, but it's only a joke, I will never let you go," said the Bear

"But you have my word!" the hunter protested

And the Bear leaned closer, close enough that the hunter could feel her breath on his face

"First, your word means nothing when we both know you will never keep it," she said

"Second, your kind takes, and takes, and takes from our's, it's time that a lesson is taught to your selfish kin," she added

"And third- I am not going to kill you to protect anyone, or to teach a lesson, though those are reasons enough... I am going to kill you, because you harmed my cub, and to do that, you must have a soul as black as the night sky, and a soul like that doesn't deserve to stay on this planet,"

The hunter stared into her eyes and quaked, for as the legend tells us, he saw nothing there but hell-fire

The humans never saw the hunter again, but the useless killing in the forest came to an abrupt stop, as the Bear declared that all of the forest folk were her children

And the humans knew what had happened when someone hurt her child

No one ever saw the hunter again, but some say, that if you were lucky enough to venture into the Bear's den and make it out alive, you would have seen a pelt on the floor that was shaped suspiciously like a human body,"

The Bird With Black Feathers

Once upon a time

High up in the trees

There lived a bird

He was a beautiful bird

With feathers so colorful that he made all the other birds jealous

With songs so sweet that it made all the humans wake up early just to hear it, and then go back to sleep

But this bird, he had one single thing that others thought was a flaw

A patch of black feathers, right over his heart

The other birds all thought this was a flaw, a curse on the beautiful bird

For black feathers were nothing to be admired

They were an absence of all the other pretty colors the bird sported

Black fathers were only sported by 'dark' birds

Ravens and starlings and crows and vultures, who were all omens of dark magic, bad fortune, and death

None of the truly GOOD birds had black feathers

And so they tried to convince him to change

To pluck the feathers over his heart

Perhaps they would grow back another color; red or blue or green, like a shiny apple, the beautiful sky, or the soft grass

And because the beautiful bird didn't know any better and wanted to be liked- to be loved- he did what the other birds all told him to do

The little bird with the black feathers over his heart plucked them out

One by one, he plucked and plucked and plucked, until his chest had a blank, heart-shaped patch of skin left where his feathers had been

And the bird…

The bird was not happy

He cried and cried

For not only did it hurt him so, so terribly to remove those perfectly good feathers, but seeing himself with that bare patch where his feathers once were was like looking in the mirror and seeing a ghost

He felt empty

Hollow

Like when he plucked out his feathers, he plucked out his heart too

And no matter how raw and red and itchy the skin of his chest was, it compared nothing to how much seeing himself so .. disfigured, so reshaped and not himself anymore hurt him

But the bird believed

He believed that by plucking those black feathers that everyone else told him were ugly, that he would become beautiful again

He believed that in the place of the ugly black feathers, would grow beautiful colored feathers

Red like a shiny apple, or blue like the beautiful sky, or green like the soft grass

He believed

So he waited

But his waiting did not pay off

For when the feathers grew back eventually- as he knew they would- they came in ink black

As dark as night

And the bird began to sob

He wanted so badly to be pretty, to be liked, to be loved

He wanted to be beautiful

And he had gone through so much pain and agony taking himself apart to please others and yet it was for nothing

And so he cried, and cried and cried

But he was all alone

Those who admired his beauty and songs did so from afar, the way someone admires the paint on a house, and the bird found that he had no true friends that way

He was all alone

That is, until something rather unexpected happened

For as the beautiful bird cried and cried, wishing for someone to hear him…

Someone finally did

A raven, as dark as the night sky, flew down from above and sat on the branch next to him

"My, what a pretty, pretty bird you are," said the raven

"You think so?" the little bird asked

For he did not see himself as pretty

You see people are funny creatures, blind to our own beauty the way one is blind when they stare directly into the sun

And no matter how many times people told the bird he was beautiful. when he looked in the mirror, all he saw were his flaws, and the little bird thought that he had many of those

"Why yes of course, just look at you!" the raven cried

"Feathers of pink and purple and orange!"

Now this, the little bird found to be quite odd

People usually dismissed those stranger colors, they wanted the pure, natural colors

Red and blue and green, sometimes yellow, but pink and purple and orange.... those were not part of his beauty, they were just... there.... too pretty to be ugly but too ugly to be pretty, that's what those were

"Pink like the flower of a lily pad, purple like the last shade of sunset, and orange like soft and juicy tangerines... and look at that, you have black feathers over your heart! Oh my, how splendid, how marvelous, how spectacular!"

"Stop!" cried the bird, shifting his wings over his heart

"They aren't splendid or marvelous or spectacular, they're ugly! Can't you see? They're ugly! Just like me..."

The raven was quiet for a moment, tilting his head from side to side the way ravens do

"I have black feathers too, you know," he finally said

"Yes but... but they're pretty on you! ALL of your feathers are black, mine is just... mine is just a patch... just THERE... colorless where it matters the most,"

"Ahhh," hummed the raven

"And what color would you have in their place then? Red? The color of anger and what lurks in a demon's eyes?"

The little bird shivered

"No, not red,"

"Oh then perhaps blue? The color of sadness and the color of cold when it freezes your bones?"

"No," decided the bird

"Not blue either,"

"Then green it seems? The color of envy and what drips down from monster slime?"

"No! Not green," the bird cried, and the raven fluttered his feathers at that

"Then what color shall you have?"

"I... I don't know," he finally relented

"There's something wrong with all of them..."

"Yes," said the raven

"There is... but there is also beauty, red like passion and the juicy, plump cherries on an ice cream sundae, blue is calm, peaceful and serene, like ocean waves rocking against the shore, green is nature, it's what we thrive on, the trees we live in are green and so is half of the world- well... more like 30% but that's unimportant.... the point is, little one, all colors have an ugly side to them, but they all have a beautiful side too, you cannot paint with a one-sided brush, it will only smear and cover half your canvas in uneven streaks, black too has it's beauty, like the night sky, delicious blackberries, or the coat on a beautiful black stallion,"

The bird nodded his understanding, but the raven could tell he was unconvinced, so he decided to take a different approach

"Tell me little bird, how did you feel when you plucked your feathers? Were you happy? Did you feel good?"

The raven asked, and the bird thought for a moment, rolling that over in his mind

"No," he finally answered

"I felt bad, I was miserable and in pain, not just physically but… in my heart too, it felt like a piece of me was missing,"

"That's because a piece of you WAS missing, you see, people like to criticize because they are not the ones ultimately paying the price, it was YOUR feathers that were plucked- not their's- your pain to suffer, your agony to endure, when you looked in the mirror, did you like yourself any better?"

"No," he answered honestly

"I felt like a piece of me was missing, I felt empty and wrong and alone…"

"If changing yourself makes you unhappy, then don't do it- not for anyone, no matter who they are or how much you want their approval, those feathers are part of you, and you should never rip away a part of yourself to please someone else- ever," the raven insisted

The little bird thought about that for a moment, thought about how he used to feel before people started to tell him how unattractive those feathers were and how much more beautiful he would be without them

He thought about how good he felt before then

How much he loved sporting all of the colors and not just the preferred, red, blue, and green

He thought about how incomplete and miserable he was without the black feathers and how much he wished he could have them back

He thought about it all and about how those who had encouraged them to pluck them out weren't there for him

And he finally came to the conclusion that the raven had been after all this time

That no matter what, your own happiness and staying true to yourself are not worth sacrificing for someone else- for ANYONE else-

"I still feel a bit strange," he concluded

"And that's alright," said the raven

"We all feel strange at times, the trick is to EMBRACE that strangeness, not fight against it, I know society has taught us the exact opposite but this is where we teach THEM, be true to yourself, black feathers and all,"

And from that day on, when the little bird sang for people in the morning and flew around the trees, it wasn't just beauty that the others envied, it was being secure in himself, and letting himself be free to be all that he can be, and all that he wanted to be, and all that he was

The Christmas Cat

Once upon a time

In a land full of Christmas cheer

There was a girl

A girl by the name of Darla

Darla lived alone in a nice house near the lake

It was a bit of a lonely place

Oh sure it was a neighborhood so technically there were people around, but it was a quiet place, no one really ever talked to each other

Usually this was fine, Darla liked to travel to new places and do new things all the time and the house by the lake was just her most recent adventure

But she couldn't help but feel lonely this time

There was just something about it that seemed so .. different....

Maybe it was because she didn't have the gaggle of little animals that she was used to having around all the time

She DID intend to get some pets. she just hadn't had the time or opportunity yet and in the meantime she was just getting lonelier and lonelier...

But there she was regardless, waiting on her pizza to cook in the oven and leaning against the kitchen chair as she happened to look out the window by the front door and see a rather peculiar sight

There was a cat on her porch

Now that alone was not unusual

Cats often roamed the neighborhood and they weren't uncommon in Darla's yard

What was strange was that this cat was just sitting there, staring through the window at her

Pinching her eyebrows slightly, she stood up and approached the door to get a better look at the kitty

The cat was gorgeous, a small, jet black little creature with the most amazing emerald-green eyes she had ever seen

Now she usually didn't intrude on the personal space of any little animals who happened to wander up on her property but for some reason this cat really struck her and she had the urge to go and meet him

So, with great caution, Darla opened the door and took a step out

And with great surprise, the cat didn't seem alarmed

Why he didn't move at all

And with curiosity, she leaned down and carefully picked him up

Yet still, the cat did not move

"Well aren't you a good boy?" Darla smiled as she held the cat closer and took him inside

The cat meowed and she smiled more, scratching behind his ears and carrying him to the kitchen

Although she knew he most likely belonged to someone, he had no collar or tags of any kind and she thought it was probably far better that she keep him inside and out of the harsh winter air and away from the roads

She would put up found posters tomorrow she figured, tonight she was cutting up a slice of pizza for her new house guest

There was just one problem with her otherwise great plan:

The next day came, and no posters went up

And it wasn't like she was KIDNAPPING the cat or anything

There was never even any proof that he had a human to go back to

It was just that it had started to snow and she couldn't go out to the copy place, that's all

And over the coming days Darla and this cat seemed to become quite fond of each other

She named him Murphy, not for any real reason other than the fact that it just seemed to call to her

And she and Murphy quickly became inseparable

Darla and Murphy seemed to do everything together and within only a few days she found herself spilling her heart to the little cat

She told him of her hopes and dreams

Talked about her job and her family

About the people she knew and the people she wished to meet

She even told him about how difficult the recent move had been, how much she wished she had someone there with her

Oh sure, she loved Murphy, she loved cats- and she loved dogs and birds and all other animals

But there was still that urge for a real human relationship that moving so far away from her last friends and family has left void

Throughout it all, each and every conversation, Murphy listened with an almost intense concentration

It really felt like he was not only listening, but really understanding each word that she had to say

And although it was sometimes odd, Darla was a firm believer in animals being smarter than people give them credit for so she tried not to pay too much mind to it

That is, until Christmas Eve

Only a few moments before midnight on Christmas Eve, there was a knock on the door

Darla, being a night-bird, was awake, but she still found it awfully odd

Who would be out knocking on doors at this time of night?

She intended to ignore it, in case it was some sort of bad news, but Murphy had other ideas and immediately ran out from under the bed and straight for the door

"Murphy! Murphy!" Darla called out as she rushed after him, scooping him up in her arms and peering out the window to see a young girl standing there

She seemed to be around Darla's age, maybe a little younger, with fiery red hair and a dress that could almost mock ugly Christmas sweaters

"Hello? Hello!?" she called as she rapped on the door

Figuring there was no use hiding now, thanks to Mr. Scaredy Cat, she grabbed an umbrella from the umbrella stand beside her and tossed open the door

"Hi, I'm here to- oh Murphy!!" the girl cried, lunging forward and ripping the cat out of Darla's arms

"You found him! He ran out a few nights ago and I've been looking everywhere for him!!"

"Oh.. so... he's your's.." Darla muttered

It provided little comfort to no that she had been right about the name

"Yeah, he's a bit of a rascal," she chuckled, stuffing the cat under one arm and holding her free hand out to her

"I'm Alex, it's nice to meet you Miss...?"

"Darla."

"Nice to meet you Darla, oh! I almost forgot why I was here!"

"There was a reason?" Darla asked with raised eyebrows

"Yes! I found this little ball of fuzz and was looking for a home for him, since clearly he wouldn't get along with Murphs here, and for some reason your house came to mind, like a vision!"

Darla stare down in surprise as Alex reached into her purse and presented her with none other than a baby ferret

"Ohhhh, ferret~~ Huh? Huh?" Alex grinned, showing the ferret around like some sort of prized jewel

Darla laughed, reaching out and picking up the ferret happily

She had never had a ferret or even met one in person, but it was hard to say no to that face, with the little twitching nose and the slightly beady brown eyes

And then there was the ferret who was by far cuter

"It's awfully cold out there... why don't you come inside and we can talk about our mutual furry friends?"

Alex beamed at the offer, nodding and thanking her profusely as she stepped into the house

"I was just making some hot chocolate, do you want a cup?"

"I'd love one thank you," the other girl replied

"Great, go make yourself comfortable, I'll be right there."

Alex nodded her head quickly and headed on into the living room, sitting down and setting Murphy in her lap and the ferret on the floor

"Missions accomplished, the ferret found a home and the girl found a friend," the cat mused

"Yeah, two birds right?" Alex smiled back

"Yes but just a question for you dear... how long do I have to stay in the form of a cat!?"

Alex didn't answer, but it turned out to be a fairly long time

Darla and Alex became inseparable best friends who, lifetimes and lifetimes later, were STILL best friends

And it took many many years, but finally Darla found out the truth about the mysterious girl and the even more mysterious cat

It's just a shame that one of Santa's Elves had to spend so long drinking milk out of a saucer first

The Christmas Wolf

Once upon a time

In a land known as the North Pole

There lived a wolf

Well, to be more specific, there lived a WEREWOLF

Now one may be wondering, how does a werewolf get to the North Pole?

This story will explain that- and more

For you see, many, many years ago, there was a baby left on the doorstep of Santa's workshop

The elf who found this baby who was mortified, immediately took him inside and began a search for his mother

But alas, she was never found

And because Santa and his helpers were NEVER ones to turn away children in need, they merely... took the baby in as one of their own

Of course no one knew at first that he was a werewolf

When Mrs. Claus held him, she only announced that he had magic in his blood- for this is the sort of thing that Mrs. Claus can sense- but she hadn't the foggiest idea what kind of magic it was

In fact, for the first thirteen years of his life, it became a bit of a game around the workshop to guess what sort of creature he was

Some believed that he was just a rather large elf

Others thought that he was a were-reindeer- a rarity perhaps but it still happened sometimes

Others still thought that perhaps he was a yeti

There were guesses ranging from a faery to a selkie to a snow sprite

For there had been all sorts of creatures to come in and through the North Pole over it's time

From Mountain Dragons to Arctic Merfolk and everything in between,...

Just never a werewolf

But that's getting a bit ahead of things

At first, everyone was eager to take care of the new baby in equal parts

But slowly it became obvious that the child had formed an attachment to one elf in particular

An elf named Darla

Darla worked in the crafts division of toy making

The division responsible for things like be-dazzlers, sticker machines, and easy bake ovens

In fact, just that July, she had been promoted to Design Supervisor

No one was quite sure WHY the baby had formed such a strong attachment to Darla, but they all accepted it, and before long she became- for all intents and purposes- his mother

She was even given the honor of naming him

She named the baby Dean, for he reminded her of some sort of rock star with his jet black hair and magnificent green eyes

And so it became that Dean was soon a staple in the North Pole

He was a sweet, gentle, and easy-going child who always seemed to be both excited and content at the same time, and he followed Darla everywhere

However, by the age of thirteen, Dean started to go through... changes....

His senses sharpened, and he was able to hear a fly fluttering around from three rooms across or a reindeer running at full speed from a mile away

He was even able to tell one person's heartbeat from another

His sense of smell was sharper, he could tell distinct scents of one elf from another even if they had all been working in the Christmas Tree Barn and smelled like pine

This came to be a rather detested ability to all except for the children, as he always managed to know just when cookies came out of the oven and were left unattended and used his power to lead troops of children into the kitchen

They lost many cookies that way, until finally the baking elves had had enough and merely got a locking gate for each kitchen

(This didn't detour him for long, he eventually started learning how to pick locks, for as good of a child as Dean was, he did have an insatiable love of cookies that knew no bounds...)

Dean also started getting stronger and faster

His body temperature rose so high that some days he didn't even need a coat to go outside

He had seemingly random aches and pains throughout his body on any occasion and his jaw was unusually sore nearly all the time

Everyone was waiting with baited breaths to see what he turned out to be, as they sensed the revelation would soon be coming

Some still insisted upon a giant elf- perhaps, a hybrid between a giant AND an elf-

Others still thought he was a were-reindeer

But most were certain that he was a yeti- through process of elimination, mostly

Darla didn't care

She'd love him all the same (although she was a little partial to a selkie herself, if for no other reason than seals being just so relentlessly cute)

It was one day after Darla had finished working that she and Dean were outside playing in the snow, when something happened

She was sitting on the porch, sipping hot chocolate and watching him fondly as she flipped through the newest design catalogs

And Dean was running around in the snow, hopping about and bounding through snow mound after snow mound

In one, out, and into another, in one, out, and into another

It seemed a tireless process but he was rather fond of it

Until one moment, when he sunk into a snow mound and didn't spring right out

Hearing the pause in the familiar clumping of snow, Darla looked up and felt her heart stutter

"Dean!?" she called out

A moment later, rather than Dean popping out of a snow mound, it was a little black wolf

Looking up at the sky, Darla saw hat the full moon had just started to rise into place

She watched as the little wolf shook himself off before bounding up to her, falling into snowfall after snowfall, but still making it to the porch and tackling her leg with excited yips and tail wags

"Well I'll be," she said with a smile, setting her mug down and picking him up

After that things changed even more

Dean spent an abounding amount of time in his wolf form playing with the children and even more time helping the elves around with various jobs that they needed him to do

By the time he was nineteen- and certainly an adult by this point- he found himself doing mostly jobs of hard labor

Chopping firewood, repairing the sleigh, carrying around heavy crates of toy material

Darla always felt a little sad watching him, as she knew that in his childhood he had always expressed so much interest in becoming a toy maker like her

But Dean didn't seem to mind

He never minded much of anything and always seemed to be content with his place in life

However, once again, that place was about to change

"Oh it's terrible! Just terrible!" shouted one of the candy maker elves as she burst into the kitchen

"What's wrong Brittany?" Dean asked, wiping his hands on his apron and turning his head toward her

He had just finished fixing one of the ovens and now the cookie bakers had asked him to roll out some dough for them as they were a little behind schedule

"It's horrible just horrible!" the elf cried

"What's wrong?" Dean repeated, a little more worried this time

"Oh it's just the worst thing that's ever happened in the history of ever!! Oh WHY did this have to hap-"

"Spit it out!" barked one of the other elves

"The reindeer are missing!" she cried

The entire kitchen went still and Dean took a step forward

"The reindeer are missing?"

"YES and on Christmas Eve no less! Oh WHY does this have to happen to us!? WHY always on Christmas Eve!? Couldn't this happen NEXT week when we have a year to find them!?" she cried dramatically

"Now Brittany are you SURE they're missing?" came the voice of the other elf as he stepped down from his step-stool

"Yes I'm SURE, how would I mistake reindeer for being missing if they were still there?"

"Well did you check the reindeer barn?"

"YES I checked the barn, what kind of idiot doesn't check the reindeer barn for reindeer!?" she shouted

The two elves started to argue with each other, chattering and throwing their hands up in frustration

But Dean just grabbed his coat wordlessly and started for the door

He was used to Brittany and Adam fighting like this, they were one of the oldest married couples at the North Pole of course

So without any hesitation, Dean slipped his coat on and went out in search of the reindeer

It really wasn't all that hard, all he had to do was go into the reindeer barn and inhale to get their scents and then follow that

Sure it would have been a heavy task for the elves, their noses weren't nearly as strong and whereas Dean could run a few miles in less than an hour, it'd take all of the energy the elves had to cross a single mile in a day

So Dean ran and ran, looking high and low for the reindeer, and when he found them, he found quite a peculiar sight accompanying them

Somehow, the reindeer had wandered all the way out to the post office, which was just a few miles away from the train station

After all they had to keep those things a fair distance from Santa's workshop, they didn't want any tourists coming along and risking disruption

They had gone through that before a few decades ago and it resulted in quite a bit of trouble

"Why are you all out here? Did Jack Frost lead you astray?" Dean teased gently as he approached the reindeer

But much to his surprise, the reindeer backed away from him

Dean felt a pang of hurt shooting through his heart, he and the reindeer had always been such good friends...

Frowning sadly, Dean tried again, and they backed away- again

Huffing out in frustration, he quickly stripped his coat away and shifted into his wolf form, trying again

The reindeer didn't quite back away, but they seemed hesitant

What was going on...?

Dean ran around and circled toward the back of the mailbox, sticking his nose in a crack and taking a big whiff

And that's when it caught him:

Reindeer treats

Someone had good-heartedly sent the reindeer treats through the mail and since it was Christmas Eve no one had bothered to check the mailbox, having been certain that they had the last of the Christmas letters for Santa days ago

So Dean shifted back into his human form, easily pulled the mailbox apart (they'd have months to construct a new one after all) and retrieved the bag of treats, much to the reindeers' delight

That only left one problem... and two questions

How did he get the reindeer home?

And who let them out in the first place?

With a sigh, he came to the realization that it would take far too long to run home and retrieve help from the others, so he left his clothes where they were, shifted into his wolf form again, and took the bag of reindeer treats in his teeth, taking off at top speed back towards the workshop

The reindeer followed alright, in fact it was quite a workout trying to outrun them all so he could lead them home

And by the time they got there, the sun was just starting to set, and he managed to toss the bag of treats to some of the elves who had been part of the reindeer search party, collapsing to the ground in exhaustion and panting desperately as he watched with a pleased smile as the reindeer all gathered back in the barn until later that night

"Well it looks like someone had quite the adventure," Darla pointed out with a smile as she walked up to him

Dean let out a little huff- it was about the only thing he had left- and smiled as Darla got a small sled and hefted him onto it before dragging him back to the house

After all, Dean was a two hundred pound werewolf

Darla was a four foot tall elf with the strength of a small rabbit

She HAD to put him on a sled

It was later discovered, thanks to Dean's strong nose once again, that one of the stable cleaners had left the barn open

The reindeer had smelled the treats on him and when he went out later on to check on the train station they merely followed him without anyone noticing and had gotten detoured at the post office once they smelled the treats

Santa was so pleased with Dean's hard work that he even let him go on the present delivery that night, letting him ride in the sleigh even

It was an honor that very few people ever got, you had to be one of only two selected elves each year to go in the sleigh with him and help deliver presents

And for a non-elf to ride in the sleigh?

Why that was unheard of

Dean didn't take it lightly either

He felt every bit as honored as he should and he worked hard to help deliver the presents, making sure to stay in his wolf form just in case the occasional child should happen to tumble out of bed

It was a lot easier to except a big dog in the house than it was a strange, six-foot tall, scruffy man (unless said man is Santa of course but Dean, sadly, looked nothing like Santa)

He even was treated to a few of the stray cookies here and there that Santa left behind

It was by far the best night of Dean's life and he couldn't wait to get home and tell Darla all about it

After that Dean's gifts were thought to be put to a bit better use than just heavy lifting, much to Darla's satisfaction, he was given all sorts of other stray jobs that were considerably much more pleasant than just shoving around boxes of plastic and fixing holes in the sleigh

But by far, the best job Dean found, was helping out the newest elf that had arrived a few weeks later

For this elf was as strange there in the North Pole as Dean was

He was tall and lanky and had virtually no body heat to speak of

He was... odd

Just like Dean had always been before he found his place

"I um... I'm a Woodland Elf," he had explained awkwardly upon receiving some of the strange looks other elves were giving him

"I'm a talented craftsman so... I spoke with Darla about working in the craft division?"

Dean, who had been in his wolf form at the time, beamed and took no time at all to shift into his human form, grabbing clothes from one of the many compartments that were stored around in recent years for occasions just like these

....

Well

.....

Maybe not JUST like these... but you get the picture

"I know Darla, you're in good hands," he said with a smile as he took a few steps closer

He had expected the new elf to look surprised, startled, or at least mildly concerned

But he just smiled positively and reached out to shake Dean's hand

"You're a werewolf? That's so cool! My forest is FULL of werewolves, I was so worried I'd never get to see one again," he said with a bright smile

"You know werewolves?" Dean asked in surprise

After all, it wasn't as if the other elves were COMPLETELY foreign to werewolves

Werewolf children received Christmas gifts just like everyone else

It's just... no one quite knew anything ABOUT them...

"Sure I do, what? You don't?" he asked in confusion

Dean gave a small shake of his head and the other elf beamed, looping his arm through Dean's

"Then I guess we have a lot to talk about, how about this, you help me out around here, and I tell you all about your people," he suggested

Dean felt a small flutter in his heart and gave a nod, leading the new elf back toward the crafting department and smiling when the freezing creature leaned into the natural heat radiating off Dean's body

"I'd like that," he confirmed

It seemed that after all of this time, Dean had finally found his place

The Crying Dragon

Once upon a time

In a land far up in the mountains

There lived a dragon by the name of Rosa

Rosa was a very beautiful dragon with bright red and black scales and beautiful, huge wings

She was talented too, the best flyer in the entire colony, and able to breathe fire much sooner than any of the other hatchlings had been

She was also kind, generous, and quick-witted, brave, loyal, and dependable, always ready to face a challenge...

Except one

And it was a challenge that everyone- of every species- faces every day: Her own emotions

Being so "perfect" was not an easy job and Rosa was a perfectionist, always wanting to be better and improve on herself, which, on it's own, is not at all a bad thing

But the harshness she held towards herself was rather extreme, and that kind of pressure weighed on her day in and day out

To always be kind, be brave, be strong

Never let anything get you down and always work through things with patience and strength

She never knew any other way, and the thought of doing anything else was utterly foreign- and quite frankly, unappreciated- to her

But there were some days when the pain and pressure of life were just too hard and she broke down, she took to the skies and breathed

spiraling tornados of fire into the air, making sure she was high enough that the rain of fire wouldn't harm anyone

She would breathe and breathe and breathe out flames until she was breathless and it took everything in her to land evenly

But there was one thing that she never did

One thing that was absolutely forbidden as far as she was concerned

Rosa never cried

Which, most of the time, was not a hard task to accomplish

Dragons in general aren't big criers, they're generally a pretty happy folk and when negativity DOES claim them it's more often in the form of anger than sadness- tears are hardly ever heard of in the dragon community, at least the parts of it that Rosa had been around

And so whenever she got the urge to cry, she found another way, she bit her tongue, dug her claws into the dirt, breathed more fire- anything she could possibly do to prevent herself from shedding those cursed tears

Crying was a bad thing, a horrible thing, as far as she was concerned....

That is, until one day, when she met Gabrielle

Gabrielle was a faery, a notoriously emotional species, and had become friends with Rosa over the past several months after meeting one day watching over the same clearing to make sure there were no hunters who would come and disrupt the unicorn foals feeding there

They had hit it off right away and had never questioned their friendship

That is.. until Rosa found Gabrielle crying one day

Now perhaps she didn't question her FREINDSHIP with the faery, but she did question.... well.... the faery herself

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle what's wrong!?" Rosa cried worriedly as she swooped down and landed next to the young faery

"Oh, nothing really, I just... I've just had a rough day," the faery sniffed back, rubbing her eyes and trying to clear the blurry vision her tears were causing

"A... rough day? You're crying over a rough day?" Rosa asked in confusion

"Well sure, why not?" Gabrielle shrugged back

And Rosa... Rosa didn't understand

Gabrielle was acting like there was nothing WRONG with this

Like crying was just some sort of natural body function as common and uninteresting as sneezing or coughing

Rosa didn't understand

That wasn't the way it was supposed to be....

"Gabrielle... you can't just cry because you had a rough day, what will people think?" she asked as gently as she could

"Who cares about what people think? I have a right to my emotions you know,"

"Well sure but... but CRYING? The only creature that has a right to cry is... is a baby and even that should probably be limited more than it is..."

Gabrielle stared at her friend as if she had just grown a second head, and while two heads weren't ENTIRELY unheard of for dragons they were usually born with them rather than the second one just emerging out of the blue one day

"Rosa... crying is a natural function, I don't understand why people have this stigma about it, you have to cry in order to release toxins from your body, it's natural,"

"There are other ways of releasing toxins Gabrielle," Rosa said seriously

"Really? Name one,"

Rosa was quiet for a moment, apparently thinking about that, though her face remained somewhat blank

"Bloodletting?"

"NO."

"But.... Gabrielle... you can't just ... cry freely like this! It isn't right! It isn't... it isn't acceptable!"

"It's acceptable to ME, and it's MY body so I'm the only one who has a right to say what I do with it,"

"But people will say-"

"I don't care what people say and you shouldn't either, moreover, they shouldn't be saying anything negative about me for crying, they have no right, are you telling me that you NEVER cry?" she asked incredulously

"I NEVER cry," Rosa confirmed

Gabrielle took a deep breath, huffing in frustration and wrinkling her nose

"That's ridiculous, you NEED to cry sometime,"

"Why? So that I can feel worse?"

"No, crying will help you feel BETTER, get those toxins out and release stress,"

"I can release stress just fine thank you," Rosa huffed defiantly

The faery sighed, her head lulling to the side and her shoulders sagging in disappointment, it was made abundantly clear that she wasn't going to get through to her friend no matter what she said or did

"Believe what you want to believe Rosa, but just know that if you ever feel like crying- do it, there's nothing wrong with it, especially not to me," Gabrielle said quietly, leaning forward and hugging the dragon close before taking to the sky again

"There IS something wrong with it! It isn't natural!" Rosa shouted back, but she felt certain that her friend hadn't heard her

The interaction plagued Rosa, it wouldn't leave her alone, for weeks she thought about that day with Gabrielle even though the faery seemed to have forgotten it with relative ease

It wasn't until another incident happened that things seemed to take any form of change though

Rosa had been walking along the forest one day, just to stretch her legs, when she suddenly heard a soft sobbing sound penetrate the trees, and although she didn't exactly WANT to stop and investigate it, she knew her mother had raised her better than that

So with some reluctance Rosa went to investigate the sound of the crying, only to find to her great surprise that it was none other than Gabrielle sitting at a nearby riverbank and consoling someone, a woman with long silver hair and... claws...?

Ok, not unusual, according to her scent Rosa could safely conclude that this was a werewolf, far from uncommon

What WAS uncommon however was the fact that the werewolf was crying

Faeries were one thing, everyone knew how emotional faeries could get, but a WEREWOLF?

To think that the great and mighty wolf was crying... something must truly be wrong with the world!

"What is it? What happened!?" Rosa shouted worriedly as she landed down a few feet away from the pair

"Skyla had a fight with her mother," Gabrielle said quietly, as if it was a secret that she needed to keep

And so, acting as it was, Rosa slipped the information into the back of her mind so that she wouldn't accidentally slip up and tell anyone at any point

However, there was still a problem, namely: The matter of Skyla crying in the first place

"And... that was enough to make you cry?" Rosa asked in astonishment

"Well yes... my mother and I are very close and ... and we just had this massive blowout," Skyla shouted as a fresh stream of tears started pouring out of her eyes

Rosa winced, looking around for some place to hide from the emotional onslaught

Of course, as the crying got worse and went on, Rosa only became more and more uncomfortable, and so she left, barely giving any condolences to the werewolf

It wasn't that she had anything against the other- not even close, she admired werewolves and she knew that if Gabrielle liked someone there must be a pretty good reason for it, but she just didn't know how to get on with people who just... let their emotions run rampant like that...

For quite a while, this was how Rosa saw things

Every time someone cried she wondered what sort of world she was living in and became just a little bit more upset by it, especially when she deemed the reason for said crying something unworthy of tears, which, just short of death, was pretty much everything

She didn't know how to handle it all

At least... until one day everything in the entire world seemed to be going wrong...

She woke up late and burned breakfast, she didn't get to the mail carriers on time to send some parcels to her friend a few colonies away, and then one of the mail pigeons got all turned around and tried to deliver her packages to some vampire she didn't even know, she got blamed for a forest fire that she most certainly did NOT create and was then yelled at for not being able to put it out before it wrought destruction, she was spotted by some humans who tried to shoot arrows at her- they were

obviously not aware of the modern conceptions of dragons- she was yelled at for not watching her younger brother when he stole a book out of someone else's hoard even though it wasn't her job to watch him- and as an adult, that burned just an extra twinge of bitterness- she got salt in her eye when she was trying to cook lunch and to top it all off her sister got into a screaming match with her and more or less told the entire colony that she was responsible for losing track of one of the pet humans that had wandered off without anyone knowing- which was FAR from true, and she couldn't even say anything about it because no one gave her a chance

All in all, Rosa was having a very, VERY bad day, and her usual methods of flying up higher and higher and letting out all of the fire in her body into the sky didn't seem to be working

She just felt so broken down and defeated and didn't know how to release this ever present bubble of stress that had conjured up and leeched onto her since the moment she woke up that morning

The final straw, however, was when she had gone to check on the new nest she had been making only to find that it had been picked clean by birds

She didn't even know how birds got up to this altitude- that's why she built it up here!

Rosa found herself wanting to scream but feeling incapable of it, instead she felt a hot sting in her eyes and her breath catching in her throat, she felt her chest erupt with pressure and pain and her legs and wings begin to tremble

Oh no....

This couldn't be what she thought it was could it?

She couldn't ACTUALLY be so weak that she was... she was CRYING... was she?

She bit back the tears, sniffing loudly and trying to will them to go away, but just as she was starting to somewhat succeed, she heard someone

approach and in her flurry of trying to adjust herself to look presentable accidentally choked out a sob instead

"Rosa?" came the voice

"N-No! Stay back! I.. I'm not decent!" she shouted

"Rosa... are you crying?"

She half expected to see Gabrielle around the corner, but it wasn't, instead it was another dragon by the name of Kara

Kara was one of the oldest and wisest dragons in the colony and was looked to for her opinions and advice more than anyone else, if there was anyone's opinion that Rosa would always expect, it would be her's

"N-No! No I'm not crying don't be ridiculous!" she shouted, trying to hide her face in her wing

"Rosa.... there's nothing wrong with crying you know," the elder dragon said calmly, her shimmering gold scales glistening in the setting sun as she walked closer

"Everyone keeps saying that, but how can that be? Crying is a symbol of weakness, it's THE symbol of weakness and I don't WANT to be weak!

Kara shook her head slowly, moving to sit down beside the younger dragon and wrapping a wing around her

"Oh Rosa, honey, the thought that crying is a thing of weakness is such outdated thinking... and it was never right to begin with, crying is just a physical reaction to emotion, just like laughing, or screaming, or your face turning red- well.. I suppose your face is ALWAYS red but you get my idea, there is nothing wrong with crying, no matter what anyone tells you,"

"But... but I FEEL like there is,"

"Rosa, be honest with me... is it maybe a little bit possible that you're ... *afraid* of crying?"

The thought had never crossed Rosa's mind, because really, what a silly thing to be afraid of

But she couldn't deny that it made sense....

"I feel so horrible, I feel like I've failed and ... I'm just so ANGRY about everything," she said quietly

"I know dear... but take my word for it, letting yourself cry, release those emotions in a way that only crying can... it WILL make you feel better,"

Rosa didn't think she could believe such a thing, but at the same time she couldn't hold back any longer and she quietly began to sob, letting her face hide in Kara's chest as the tears rolled out of her eyes

And somehow, some way.... the elder dragon was right

Crying DID make her feel better and she couldn't explain why

It felt like popping a bubble that had been sitting inside of her chest for so long that she had forgotten it even formed in the first place

And when she was done, nothing bad had happened

The world hadn't ended

The sky hadn't fallen

And no one had come out from behind a tree to point and laugh and call her weak

"Do you feel better?" Kara asked kindly

Sniffing, Rosa nodded and rubbed at her eyes a little more

"I do."

"Good, I'm happy to hear it,"

"And... I think I owe someone an apology," Rosa confessed, she had to apologize to Gabrielle for her way of thinking, for the way she had argued with her before

"I'm glad to hear that too, apologizing for something is a very, very big step, it takes only the strongest people to apologize,"

Rosa felt her heart swell with pride at that and her wings stretched out a little further than usual, which didn't go unnoticed by Kara who was letting out a small chuckle of amusement

"I must warn you though my darling Rosa, you are not the only one out there who's thought crying is wrong, there are plenty of backwards people who think that way and who WILL criticize you for it, especially being a girl, any emotion women have is immediately criticized and taken as a direct insult on them as people, be careful, and don't let people like that discourage you, don't ever let anyone tell you that it isn't ok to cry, not over anything, I don't care if it's a death in the family or a glass of spilled milk, if you feel like crying, that's exactly what you should do, it's your body telling you what you need and you need to listen to that,"

Rosa gave a slow nod of understanding, she knew that there would be people who thought the way she used to, who would punish her for her emotions just because they didn't understand, and although the thought of that hurt, she wasn't about to back down and try to hold them in anymore

It didn't matter to her what people had to say or who had to say it

It didn't matter if it was a peer or a parent, if it was someone important or unimportant, an employee or a boss or a teacher or a student, none of it mattered at all, NO ONE had the right to tell her not to cry, and anyone who tried would be very sorely disappointed in what would result from that sad and sorry attempt

"Don't worry Kara," she assured the older dragon as she stepped towards the exit of her cave, intending to go apologize to Gabrielle before it was too late

"I know that if anyone hurts me, it's ok to cry about it, and if anyone thinks it isn't, they'll just have to cry about THAT to someone who cares"

The Dancing Wolf Pack

Once upon a time

In a land not too far from our own off the beaten path

There lived a werewolf named Raven

Raven was the most beautiful werewolf in all of the lands

Striking everyone she came near with her beautiful dark skin, tight kinky hair, and soul-filled brown eyes, and most of all her cheerful smile

Raven was the Alpha of a very large pack this side of the land

And there was a reason it was so large

For Raven was far more than just her beauty

She was a great leader

Her pack had the utmost respect for her and they were always prepared for the biggest troubles to come their way

No matter if it were hunters or turf wars or random experimental creatures escaped from the local toxic waste plant/villainous lair

Raven's pack was always prepared and they were one of the very few packs in the land who kept the numbers strong and their betas safe

Many other packs thought that surely, Raven must have inherited this power and sensibility from her family line, having no idea that Raven was not even a born werewolf to begin with

And wandering lone wolves thought that surely she must be a strict and exhausting Alpha who worked her pack to the core until they could only train and sleep

There weren't too many other packs who held as strong and sturdy as her's did after all

But Raven's methods were not some divine intervention of good genes (although she did have some pretty good jeans she thought were divine intervention all on their own but that's another story entirely)

And it wasn't due to being a ruthless commander whipping her pack mates into shape either

It was actually quite an unorthodox method if she did say so herself

It was through music

Or quite more specifically, the things that came with music

Like dancing, meditating, yoga, overall health and fitness

Some Alphas thought this meant forcing kale-infused diets and sending their betas on training sprees that would put any pro fighter to shame

Others thought this meant using intimidation and pain to force their betas to submit to their will and make them more "cohesive"

But Raven believed that music could solve all of the world's problems if only people would let it

And she intended to start with the people closest to her

Six days out of the week were different exercise regimens (the seventh was movie night, because even fun fitness can be exhausting without a break)

Mondays were yoga

Tuesdays were running and jogging

Wednesday were movie style combat training montages

Thursdays were swimming or pack sport games like soccer depending on the season and the general weather (sometimes they had to stay in the gym and play an extreme, werewolf version of Sharks And Minnows that did in fact involve teeth and screaming)

Fridays were zumba

And Saturdays...

Saturdays were Raven's favorite

Saturdays, free dance night

Where inhibitions came to die and with it, the pride of over 90% of her pack mates

It isn't her fault that the others have no groove, honestly

Sundays were movie days but that was neither here nor there

"I think we should go with a disco theme," Raven heard as she looked up from her schedule

"We did disco two weeks ago Michelle, we aren't doing disco this soon again- but I like the spirit of it," Raven said with a positive smile

Michelle sank in her seat, thinking for a moment as her foot tapped on the table

"Taylor Swift?"

"We did that last week,"

"And it was a good thing so we should do it again,"

"Jack is starting to get really tired of it though, you DO blast her dance songs in the gym EVERY time we have to be indoors,"

"And for good reason,"

"Well, as much as I appreciate your enthusiasm to keep moving there has to be something else you're interested in,"

There was a long pause. Michelle staring at the wall for a moment and tapping her fingers on the coffee table

"Disco?"

"That's... not really all that productive..." Raven added slowly

"What about another karaoke night? Everybody has to sing and whoever isn't singing is dancing,"

"That's... actually not a horrible idea, thank you Teddy," Raven smiled

"You're only doing this so your professional singing butt can judge the rest of us for our lack of vocal skills," Michelle pointed out

"I'm really not going to deny that but the Alpha approved it and you know the rules, no take-backsies,"

"Are you REALLY twenty-four or are you a nine-year-old POSING as a twenty-four-year-old?" the two argued

Raven cringed

This was her least favorite part of being an Alpha...

Breaking up the fights- hopefully before they really escalated into fights-

"We're expecting rain this Wednesday, why don't you decide on a game to play Michelle?" she proposed

The tension was instantly diffused and Michelle bowed up like a peacock showing her feathers

Not very wolfish but Raven slightly suspected if she was in her wolf form Michelle would be prancing

"Live action role-playing, something from one of those superhero dramas that's all the rage these days, maybe involving motorcycles and swords,"

Raven cringed

Ah the unique ones....

They certainly liked to test her judgment that was for sure...

She really should have thought this one through...

"Bicycles, FAKE swords, we agree on the fandom through a voting basis- nothing from HBO,"

"What about something from MTV?" piped up one of the other wolves from the kitchen

Raven wasn't sure WHEN her house became the automatic clubhouse for her entire pack to traipse in and out of at their leisure but here they were

"That's to be debated, does MTV even have any superhero shows?"

"No but neither does HBO, why not go REALLY meta and do one of those teen supernatural shows?" the girl grinned

"I like the way you think Laura," Michelle smiled from the couch

"As long as I can convince you all to exercise for more than ten minutes a day without killing everyone in the surrounding area I think just about anything is up for grabs," Raven added

"Well as long as the rules don't allow for ALMOST killing each other then I'm good," another wolf commented

".... Seriously though what did your last Alpha DO man?" one of the others asked

"No, nuh-uh, that is a conversation for my extensive list of therapists only thanks, Jack signing off on this one, not letting this bat out of the cave," Jack snorted as he grabbed the bowl of popcorn from Michelle's lap

"Are you REALLY eating that before dinner?" Laura frowned from the kitchen

Raven, sadly, didn't even have time to address this issue as a moment later the phone started ringing

The business phone at that

She put down the schedule she had been working on in her calendar and got up from the kitchen table, racing to grab the phone off of the hook

"You've reached Raven with Alpha Fitness how can I help you?" she addressed into the phone

Her pack may practically be her children (see above for exhibit A) but Alpha Fitness was her BABY

The gym was the only gym in the entire state that catered specifically to supernatural creatures and their needs

Surprisingly the reason for creating the gym wasn't because of all the ruined dumbbells and treadmills that her last gym went through every year from dealing with non-human sorts, but because of the ones who were ruining the equipment

Raven knew from personal experience that werewolves didn't exactly get proper exercise from lifting human weights or running at human speeds and on days when the outdoors were off-limits something had to give

She decided that something had to be done

And so she created Alpha Fitness as that something

It was a very popular place even with other packs

And now the place was getting franchised into two other locations

It certainly meant a lot more work for her and it made coordinating things with her pack a little harder but in Raven's mind, if it was helping keep others of their kind stay in shape and not lose the war on the hunters or whatever else was dredged up out of their nightmares, it was well worth it

She was always one who preferred working all day and actually being tired when she went to bed anyway

"Yes I have the lease information ready to fax over, I'll send it right now. OK? Thanks Aaron," she said pleasantly as she hung up

"Alpha~ You've made a minor miscalculation~" hummed another voice from the couch

"Alright Emily, lay it on me," she said with the same amount of cheerfulness she always presented

It was rather hard to get Raven in a bad mood and she had been an Alpha long enough now that very rarely did she let any of the pack members ruffle her fur anymore

Six months into the beginning of her Alpha stint and she was more than ready to say "been there, done that" and be very and truly done with inner-pack disputes

They were the leading cause of death among werewolves after all, often causing everything from actual fighting to attracting attention from other werewolves who were looking for an opportunity to bring down the pack, even to hunters who knew too much about pack dynamics

Her peaceful, gentle, and cheerful nature were just another good reason why her pack seemed to be one of the biggest successes in the region

One of these days, she figured, all of those angsty, broody, constantly-in-pain Alpha sorts were going to figure out that you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar and then, hopefully, they would take from her lead and all be happy

She doubted it would happen in her lifetime but it was a wish for a distant future perhaps

"Did you completely forget that Monday is the full moon?" Emily asked

Thank goodness for Emily

She was Raven's second in command, always a step behind to make sure that any mistakes or look-overs were taken care of

"I DID forget... alright, luckily Mondays are morning yoga, Sam, can you run the gym for me while I make sure the trail is clear?" she asked

Sam looked up from his laptop and gave her a thumb's up and so she turned her attention to Laura

"Laura, wi-"

"Pack dinner, already on it, better call Cassie and make sure she can do the dessert,"

Full moons meant pack dinners and pack dinners meant a lot of food- and even pastries

Not exactly something Raven was fond of but with a huge pack of werewolves to cater feed before they were overtaken by the power of the moon and had to run it off in a forest for two or three hours in the middle of the night she supposed if it took a little cake or pie to settle their spirits and make them more pliable ... well... at least they'd be burning off the sugar

And she was pretty sure werewolves didn't get high blood sugar easily anyway

"Don't worry, I'm calling her now, did everybody vote on cupcakes this month?"

A collective affirmation came from the present pack and with that Raven finished the preparations, putting everything into place so that Monday could be another successful run

Full moons, you see, are the most important time of the month for werewolves

But it isn't all about murderous rampages and tieing people up in their basements to keep the wolves in

The best way to handle full moons was to run as freely as possible and let the wolves OUT

Let the wolf sing and breathe and enjoy the dirt on their paws

The wolf was a part of any werewolf (thus the name) and should be respected as much as any and every part of a person

It's unhealthy to not eat just because hunger is an inconvenience

It's unhealthy to ignore one's own thoughts and opinions just because it's safer not to go against the grain and start an argument

And it's unhealthy to keep the wolf in just because humans are frightened of the aspect of letting it run wild

Well Raven certainly wasn't going to let that influence her pack

And so when the night of the full moon- like they did every month- they met up for dinner at Raven's apartment and then all drove out in a couple of carpools to the biggest patch of woods in the city

Well just outside of city lines really, up in the mountains

And once there was enough greenery around everyone gathered

Shoes and outerwear discarded as everyone looked to Raven, waiting on her command

"My beautiful brothers and sisters, tonight the moon is full and the lunar Goddess is bringing forth our most natural sides to praise her, it's time we honor the gift we were given and run beneath the moonlight, let the wolf free and allow her- or him- to breathe the way we breathe every day and so often suppress our better natures, now follow me, and we'll run until our wolves are satisfied,"

She preached this speech every month but it never ceased to make the pack clap and howl in appreciation

And that never ceased to make Raven feel a burst of happiness in her chest from the positive attention

"Then let's run!" she shouted, turning toward the woods and taking a deep breath as the shift took over

She jumped forward, bursting into a run, and by the time her feet hit the ground they had become paws

A beautiful black wolf with glowing red eyes now sprinting through the woods and just allowing herself to relax into her body

Feeling the earth beneath her paws and the power of the moon high up in the sky

Being a wolf- being an Alpha- wasn't always easy

But it was at these moments when it was it's most rewarding

The Elves And The Proposal

Once upon a time

In a land many maps away

There lived an elf named Kasia

Kasia was the leader of a prominent band of Elven sea traders, hailing from the southern region of Arktina

She was considered to be fairly high-born and well-to-do and a success... for her region

But you see therein lied the problem, because although Kasia was seen as prize in Arktina, she was seen as nothing but trouble in the northern city of Ohrana

Ohrana was a rich state, filled to the brim with luxury and riches and decadence

And it's in Ohrana where Kasia's true love, Elliot lived

Elliot was not royalty, but he was still the only child of a very rich and highly political family

And Elliot's parents did not approve a single lick of Kasia

Now some may not understand why this is a problem, but in some Elven cultures, it's traditional for men to be seen as weak, fragile, creatures who do little more than care for the house and family while women are the warriors, huntresses, and providers

The only son of a wealthy family in some Elven societies was seen like a precious gem and couldn't just marry anyone, there were lines of succession to be spoken of and if they were going to give up their family name for their son's spouse it better be for a good one

Kasia may be a highly skilled warrior and an exceptionally talented trader, but she was not of wealth or high society and one could say that Elliot's parents didn't want her working class rubbing off on their son

Elliot, however, did not care

The moment he laid eyes on Kasia's beautiful, long black hair, emerald-green eyes, and olive skin, he was in love

Kasia however, found herself needing a bit more getting used to, to Elliot

Although he was kind and gentle and embodied the idealistic qualities of males in Elven society he was still high-class and a bit too clean for her liking

She was a sea trader after all, she wasn't used to people who didn't have a speck of dirt on their clothes

They were very different people yes, but they fell in love before Kasia next shipped out

And when she did, oh it was heartache for them both

They wrote letters constantly, delivered by Kasia's raven and Elliot's owl

They both longed for the day that they could see each other again, and with that day quickly approaching, Kasia decided it was more than soon enough for her to make things a little more... final between them

She found herself in a high-class city not far east from Ohrana and by the end of the day was walking out of a high-end jewelry store with an extra bounce in her step

Yes, she decided, this was it

She was finally going to be seeing Elliot again the day after next and she couldn't be more excited

She just hoped he said yes....

However, as it so happened- and to no one's surprise- it wasn't Elliot she had to worry about

It was his parents

The moment she asked their permission to ask for Elliot's hand in marriage they answered with a resounding no

This did not detour Kasia however, as she immediately went to ask Elliot on a date for later that evening

After all, just because she would prefer to have their blessing, it didn't mean she was just going to stop pursuing her one true love, that would be giving up awfully quickly

"Do you think we could go out to the mountains? I want to paint something,"

Elliot was a painter, it was a compatible career with Kasia's, he could travel anywhere with it and could find plenty of inspiration at sea

"Certainly, but I want to take you somewhere else first," she replied with a smile, glancing in the nearest mirror and straightening her ponytail just slightly

"Where?" Elliot asked innocently as he looked up from his sketch pad

"You'll see, just follow me," she insisted with a smile, taking his hand and leading him silently out of the house and towards the woods

It was the most romantic thing she could think of, taking him to the woods where they first met to propose

And Elliot seemed to agree, the moment Kasia had finished her speech and pulled a black velvet box out of her leather coat pocket, Elliot's eyes started to well up and the tears definitely started streaming when she opened the box to reveal the silver necklace she had bought for him

The necklace was short and dripped with garnet gems and moonstone beads, it may not have been the most luxurious in terms of rarity or

expense but it was truly a work of art that the stones held deep meaning that all tied back to happiness, love, devotion, and family

And it was no secret that they wanted a family of their own

"May I put it on you?" Kasia asked with a bright smile

Elliot, too stunned to speak, just nodded his head excitedly as she dropped the box to the forest floor and stepped behind him to secure the necklace

"I should have known you would do this behind our backs," Kasia heard, turning around and frowning upon seeing Elliot's parents had arrived

"I TOLD you that I was going to propose to him regardless of your blessing, you have absolutely no reason to be surprised," she stated

"I thought you were kidding," his mother explained

"I don't kid," Kasia sighed, tossing her ponytail and taking a protective step in front of Elliot, who had turned by now and was anxiously running his fingers through his short blond locks

"You're really taking him on your ship with you? That's dangerous! He won't last a day out there!"

"Mother I'm not defenseless," Elliot protested

"He's a man, not a sheet of glass," Kasia pointed out

Elliot, only mildly surprised by the defense, stood a little taller as if that would somehow help his case

"He can't defend himself out there, what is he going to do? Stab something with a paint brush?"

"That's what I'm here for, you don't think I'm going to marry him just to let him get eaten by a kraken or something do you?" Kasia replied defiantly

Before Elliot's mother had a chance to protest that, there was the sound of crackling tree branches and the small group all looked up to see a gang of ogres stomping their way

"I'll take left, you take right," Kasia said immediately, drawing her sword as she dashed towards the group

Ogres were a particularly violent bunch in these parts, mainly out of a long-held grudge against the elves for land disputes that happened centuries ago

"I'm right behind you," Elliot's mother agreed as she took off in the opposite direction

After all, Elven women were efficient if nothing else, no petty argument- no matter how heated or deeply run it was- ever got in the way of combat

"Come on son, we have to retreat to the bushes," Elliot's father insisted, tugging on his hand

"No!" the younger elf frowned

"I want to help my future bride! I want to help Kasia!"

There was a beat of silence in which only the ogre's screams could be heard

"That's cute son but you'll need to work on your delivery, let's go"

"Father I'm serious! I'm not a two-legged squirrel! I can defend myself!"

Somehow this was not missed by either of the women as they both found themselves scoffing as they easily disarmed the rest of the ogres

"I will fight!" Elliot huffed defiantly, causing a ruckus of laughter from the other three elves as the women started to clean their swords

Elliot glared in frustration, picking up a bow and arrow and setting them before pulling back and shooting towards one of the ogres

The arrow flew alright

Right into a tree branch where you could hear a very disrupted squirrel chattering in anger at being disturbed

Elliot slowly put the bow down, scooting it across the forest floor with his foot and looking up at the sky as if he had never seen the bow before

"You really want THAT at sea with you?" Elliot's mother asked with a sigh

"I'll teach him," Kasia smirked, crossing her arms over her chest and rocking back slightly on the heels of her long leather boots

There was a moment of silence as the aforementioned squirrel tossed an acorn angrily at Elliot's head, causing the man to yelp and spin around, looking for the perpetrator

"....Really?" his mother hissed

"I'll teach him," Kasia repeated

"You don't even want to TRY someone of your own.... skill set?"

Kasia shook her head, still smirking in amusement and glancing hopefully at her fiancé's mother, who just sighed in defeat and shook her head

"Well you can't possibly do any worse than my sister did with her husband,"

"Is that a blessing I hear?" Kasia smirked, gently bumping her hip against the older elf's

Elliot's mother looked none too pleased but with a dramatic eye roll that could rival the queen of sarcasm, she began to nod

"I still don't think I like you but I suppose I can learn to live with you,"

"No offense, but ditto," Kasia mused, cringing as the squirrel from earlier finally launched what would appear to be his final stage of attack by jumping on Elliot's head and causing the elf to scream as he tried desperately to peel the animal away

Both women tilted their heads and narrowed their eyes in an almost twin like fashion as they waited it out, but apparently the squirrel was there to stay

"I guess that's my cue," Kasia sighed

"Good luck," her future mother-in-law called back

Kasia cleared her throat, letting out a sharp whistle that stunned the squirrel and caused the little animal to let go of her fiancé's hair and run up the nearest tree

"You have GOT to teach me how to do that," Elliot said with a small smile

"One of many things love, one of many things," she sighed, licking her fingertips as she tried to straighten out his hair

"You... you know I don't need you to do that, right?" Elliot mumbled as he quickly started patting down his hair

Kasia made an indecisive grumble before bending down and starting to pick up the fallen necklace box

"So... it's over? We're in the clear? My parents gave their blessing?" Elliot asked excitedly

"Yes, they did,"

"Yes!" the male elf shouted happily, fist-pumping the air

"Now for the hard part,"

"Come again?" he squeaked

"Believe it or not dear, your parents were the easy ones, it's MY parents who are going to be hard to impress,"

Elliot sighed loudly, hanging his head and following Kasia back toward his house

He had a feeling he was going to be bearing the brunt of this problem....

The Exotic Pet Rescue

Once upon a time

In a world full of wondrous creatures

There lived a Dragon-Fae by the name of Sarah

Sarah was a beautiful Dragon-Fae who was full of laughter and love and joy

However, there was something that made her quite sad

One day she was going along with her business, drawing something for a friend of her's, when she heard a voice

"Pups! Get your Barghest pups here!"

Barghest pups?

Why now that couldn't be right at all

Barghest were a type of spiritual black dog that were sometimes omens of death, other times creatures of protection

Famously, Black Shuck and Hell hounds were related to Barghest (although not TECHNICALLY Barghest themselves, just more like cousins)

Some Barghest could even shapeshift into human form

But surely no one was giving them away or worse selling them, that would be the worst kind of cruelty

"Barghest pups! Only a hundred gold slivers!"

Apparently, she was wrong

The thought that someone was selling these pups- who had likely been separated from their mother (or mothers) was making her sick

Just sick enough, in fact, to stop what she was doing, rise to her feet, and march over to the merchant

"Ah yes Ma'am! Would you like to buy a Barghest?"

"Not really," she hummed, clearing her throat, opening her mouth, and breathing a rush of fire onto the merchant

The man screamed and screamed, running around and trying to shake the flames off, which really just made her shake her head in disappointment

She grabbed the box of Barghest puppies and immediately headed toward home

She wasn't sure what she was going to do with them exactly, they WERE just babies after all and couldn't survive on their own, but she supposed she was going to have to find their mother and just house them in the meantime

There was, of course, a problem with this

Eight ghostly death-omen puppies + one small house + one caretaker did not = a good idea

Within only a week Sarah found herself absolutely and utterly exhausted, and to make matters worse she hadn't gotten any progress in finding the pups' mother (or mothers) either

To make matters worse, it was only a week and a few days after finding the Barghest puppies that she stumbled upon something else

"Baby griffins for sale! Get your quality griffin chicks just in time for Christmas!"

That had Sarah putting her groceries down and rolling up her sleeves as she marched over to the merchant shouting stupidly on the street

She ended up with a box of chirping, chattering, griffin chicks a moment later

By the time a second week went by she was practically living on no sleep

She didn't know what she was going to do, the searches for the mothers of the abandoned pups and chicks kept coming up empty and feeding and housing fourteen baby magical animals was a chore like nothing else

Just trying to keep them all from killing themselves by accidentally doing something stupid was enough to send her to an early grave- how many holes could baby griffins find to get themselves stuck in anyway?

It was approaching her third week that the final straw broke

She was just on her way back from hanging flyers- a last-ditch effort if ever there was one- when she heard it

The thing that broke the very last piece of her resolve

"Dragon eggs! Get your real quality dragon eggs here! Half-price and just in time for Christmas! Hatch a baby dragon under your tree today!"

Predictably, a flame flew out of Sarah's mouth in exasperation as she stomped toward the merchant

She came home with a dozen dragon eggs and a stomach full of frustration

The dragon eggs wouldn't be THAT hard to maintain as long as they were just eggs

But once they hatched?

It would be almost impossible for her to care for twenty-six baby magical creatures in one house all alone

"Why don't you find another place for them then? And someone else to help you care for them," suggested one of Sarah's dearest friends, Dante

"I don't know where I would go, or what I would do," she explained with a sad sigh

Sympathetically, Dante patted his paw against her back and licked her face

Dante was, of course, a dog

"Well, what do humans do with animals in this situation?"

"Take them to some sort of pet rescue or zoo usually," she shrugged

"So then, why not create a rescue center of your own? You can still keep an eye out for the mothers of these little folks, but you can do so now without having to house them all and take care of them all by yourself,"

She supposed, reasonably, that he was right but she just didn't know where to begin

"Don't worry," Dante said with a smile

"I have some friends who can help you,"

And nothing more needed to be said

When Sarah opened the rescue center a month later it was with the help of many of the forest animals in the nearby area who had heard of her plight and wished to help

It was also with the acquisition of three unicorn foals and six basilisk hatch-lings

People came from all over to help Sarah with her rescue efforts and within a year it was one of the most visited places in the realm

Everyone helped search for the families of the animals- some of who weren't even babies at this point, she had been tracking down exotic pet rings for months and had found just about everything from full-grown Phoenixes to adult werewolves who had been raised in the pet trade and couldn't function in their human forms

She kept them all and when the time came that she found their family, she contacted them and they came to pick up their loved one with open arms

Of course, not all stories had such happy endings and many times she either came up empty-handed or worse came up with a confirmation that the creature in question had no family

Or, had no family left anyway

In those cases it was always a delicate process of what to do, usually someone of the same species or someone who consistently worked with the same species-like Unicorn Maidens for example- came to give a home to the orphans

It was always difficult seeing them go, but at the same time extremely satisfying and relieving

She never did find the family of the Barghest puppies, but after about a month she gave them to a Banshee friend of her's

Banshees were also omens of death after all and were one of the few creatures fully equipped to raise Barghests without turning them into helpless confused pets

It was a hard job, but it was also rewarding

And if she took excitement in burning the merchants like barbecue kabobs then, well, that was just one of the perks she supposed

The Fallen Prince

Once upon a time

In a land that had long ago gone to war

There lived a king

The king was aged, not elderly, but no longer young

He had been fighting this war since he was just a young boy, for it was his father's war to begin with

And now he had sent his sons into battle to continue their grandfather's war for him

Today was the day that the war had come to an end, finally

A treaty had been made and signed upon the prompting of the queen

A prompting that was not at all quiet or taken lightly, for she had been requesting it for many, many years now

And so finally, the king signed the documents and dissolved the war, sending word back to the battlegrounds to call his soldiers- and his sons- home

His sons, Tristan and Isaac, had been split apart upon arrival to the battlegrounds

Isaac went to the north, and Tristan went to the south

And when the two sent word back home, they brought back very different words indeed

Tristan spoke of love, of having fallen for someone during the battle who he desperately wished to marry

The king read this letter first and was elated, for he thought, he would have heirs, and even though Tristan was the younger son- and those

heirs most likely would never inherit the throne- there was no such thing as too many heirs

When the king read the letter from the north, however, any happiness he had at Tristan's news faded away

The letter was not from his older son, it was from a doctor on the battlefield, who had sent word that his eldest heir was dead

He had been run through just the day before, at what would have been the same time the king was signing the peace treaty

The kingdom mourned

Isaac had been the most beloved member of the royal family since his birth

With his easy smiles, brilliant charm, and quick wit, there was not a person in the kingdom who did not mourn his death

And the king?

The king began to go mad with grief

His anger at the other kingdom- the one he had signed a treaty with, at the same time that his son was being slaughtered by their men- grew more and more furious with each passing day

His anger was stalled, however, when Tristan returned home

After weeks of mourning seeing his younger son's face had been refreshing in ways that he hadn't thought were possible and he eagerly ran to him

Tristan was still grieving the loss of his older brother as well, but the king wished to put that aside, he wished to meet this bride that Tristan spoke so fondly of in the hopes of having a quick wedding and beginning the process of having heirs

It was never too soon to start having heirs

"I'm glad you're so excited Father," Tristan said brightly, smiling from ear to ear as he cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck

"I... I should probably go myself,"

"Of course," the king had given with a stern nod, watching Tristan rush off towards the doors to the throne room in a flurry

For the first time in weeks he felt a small blossom of happiness beginning to swell in his chest, perhaps this was the sunshine this kingdom needed after so long of nothing but rain

However, when Tristan opened the doors again, his arm firmly and protectively wrapped around an armor-clad back, the king stared on in confusion

"Where is your bride?" he asked in confusion

Tristan flinched, tightening his grip on the other

"I never said I would have a bride Father, I said I had fallen in love with the person I wished to marry,"

The king gave another long sweeping gaze to the man wrapped under his son's arm and felt his stomach churn with ill

The coat of arms printed so boldly on his chest was of the kingdom across the sea

The very kingdom he had signed the treaty with

The very kingdom that had killed his first-born son

"My dear, won't you introduce us?"

The king snapped his head toward his wife, who was smiling more brightly than he had seen in years

"Mother, Father, this is Liam," Tristan replied, clearly swelling with happiness as the other prince- Liam, as it were- looked up at him and pondered something in his ear

"I'm sure everything is fine, isn't that right Father?" Tristan asked as he turned his attention back to the king

Things were not fine, the king was outraged

"How dare you?" he breathed

"How dare you bring blood into our home of the same line that killed your brother!? Have you no respect!? Have you no honor!? Have you no decency!?"

Liam took a protective step in front of Tristan, but the other prince pulled him back, wrapping his arm around his waist now to keep him closer

"Father, this wasn't Liam's fault, he wasn't even there, he was with me in the south, you know this,"

"It is HIS blood that caused MY son's blood to be spilled! Do not give me such semantics!"

"I am your son too! I mourn Isaac but I cannot live my life in grief for him- nor can Mother, nor can you, this kingdom must heal somehow and it's time Father!"

The king took a furious step forward, his face blushed red with blood flowing through his veins as he seethed out a deep breath

"You are not to marry that creature, you are not to have another thing to do with him or you will no longer be a son of mine!" he shouted

Tristan stared up at him in shock, swallowing and reaching desperately for something to hold onto

What he found was Liam's hand

"Come on, come on Tristan," he said quietly, pulling him desperately backwards

"I am warning you BOY! Don't test me! If I should ever see you with a cretin from that kingdom again, I'll disown you AND hang the beast!" he screamed

Turning quickly on his heel, Tristan pulled Liam by the arm and raced out of the throne room

They rushed down the halls and turned in a stumble down a flight of stairs

They ran and ran, and didn't stop until they were outside, on the very peak of the hill that the castle was situated upon, overlooking the roaring, crashing seas below

Tristan collapsed onto his belly, heaving heavy breaths and shaking all over despite the heat outside preventing him from possibly being cold

"Tristan... Tristan it's OK," Liam said quietly, dropping down to his hands and knees and carefully patting his betrothed's cheek to get his attention

"It's OK Tristan, my family will ADORE you, you can live with us," he said softly

Tristan let out a choked breath and shook his head vigorously

It was obvious that Liam had very little understanding of politics and the kingdom, and that was to be expected, he was the youngest of twelve children, eight of who were boys, the chances that Liam would ever rule his kingdom were nearly none

Tristan's kingdom on the other hand....

"I am the only heir," he breathed out

"I have to rule someday,"

"And when that day comes you will,"

"Not if I'm disowned!"

"Tristan, surely he's just upset... shocked perhaps," he suggested

He shook his head desperately again, sitting up and cupping Liam's face gently

"You cannot stay," he breathed

Liam jerked away from him, staring at him with a look of hurt and betrayal

"Excuse me!?"

"You cannot stay, here in the castle, I fear for your life if my father were to see you... please, allow me to send you somewhere else, for now, just for now, let me... let me have a chance to cool things down," he suggested

Liam looked skeptical but with a hesitant sigh he nodded his head, inhaling deeply when he felt the larger of them toss his arms around Liam's neck and pull him closer, burying his head in Liam's shoulder

"Oh... come now Sweetheart, don't be so dramatic, it's only a little banishment," he said with a gentle smile as he gave Tristan a soothing rub across his back

The other prince let out a bark of a laugh, shaking his head slowly and closing his eyes

"Sure, what's a little beheading among future in-laws?"

"See!? Now you're getting it!"

The light humor was working perfectly to put Tristan's mind at ease

The king, however, was not so easily soothed

"How could you do that!?" the queen shouted at the top of her lungs

"How could you speak to our son and his potential groom like that!?"

"Be quiet Marissa! I haven't the patience for this nonsense today! How dare that boy do something so ridiculous? He can't even find a proper BRIDE, he finds another PRINCE, and not just ANY prince, no I

wouldn't be so frustrated if it were just ANY prince, it had to be the one who had a hand in killing our boy!"

"I'm sure Liam had nothing to do with that," the queen reasoned quietly

The king huffed in anger, snarling and shaking his head vigorously

"No... no I assure you, he did," he growled out

"You don't know that,"

"Don't I!?"

"No, you don't!"

"He had the coat of arms printed on his chest like a badge of honor, he may as well have hung Issac's head across his breast-plate!" he snapped

"There's no reasoning with you when you get like this," the queen said with a sigh as she began to walk away

"Mark my words, our only son left will not be involved with that CREATURE any longer!"

The queen rolled her eyes, muttering under her breath in a mocking tone as she headed for the outside, intent on finding her son and his newly betrothed husband-to-be

~+~

After three days had passed, things were nearly back to normal in the kingdom

There was still a cloud of tension surrounding the royal family but most of it had dissipated by now

"Father, I need to speak with you about something," Tristan said quietly

"What is it?" the king grumbled out, sipping at his tea and turning back to the letter he had received not long ago

"I need to speak with you about Liam,"

The king paused, slowly putting down his teacup back on the saucer and tossing the letter behind his back

"Say that again,"

"I said that I need to speak with you about my fiancé, Liam," he replied simply

"Your fiancé," the king growled out in a mocking tone, snorting and rolling his yes

"You have no fiancé boy,"

"Stop! Please stop acting like that! Liam is the one I've fallen in love with, he's the one I've chosen to marry!"

The king stood up, marching toward the prince and leaning down to be directly in Tristan's face

Instinctively, the prince leaned back, trying to get away

"You have chosen NOTHING, the next time I see that scoundrel I'll have his head, and I swear it will be put on a pike!"

"Why?! Because that's what Isaac would have wanted!? For you to act like a completely unreasonable dictator!?"

The king, in his furry, slapped his hand across Tristan's face, knocking him out of his chair

When Tristan stood, again, he was trembling from head to toe, shaking his head and taking a few steps back

"Tristan," his mother tried to call out, but he didn't listen

The prince ran

He ran out of the dining hall and up the stairs higher and higher and higher still until he found himself in one of the towers

Granted it was definitely one of the shorter towers, but it was a tower nonetheless, and Tristan found himself falling to his knees, staring up

for something, anything, anything that could possibly make any of this better

But no such sign came and Tristan became ever more aware of just how bad this situation was

Hugging his chest closely, he leaned back against the wall of the tower and hung his head, beginning to sob

The prince sobbed and sobbed until the entire kingdom could hear him

His tears ran the tower wall and pooled around his feet

His screams infected the entire palace

His hurting was so deep and so intense, that people who had never even met Tristan before mourned with him for reasons they did not know

Finally, the queen came and found her son, perched on the steps, his head tilted back as he tried to catch his breath, the tears running down his forehead from the strange position

"Tristan," the queen called out quietly, perking the boy's interest

"Mother... Mother please," he begged quietly

"I know Tris, I know," she added with a soft smile, sitting down next to him and giving him a gentle pat on the leg

"Mother please... I'm in love with him,"

"I understand that my darling, and rest assured, you WILL have your true love,"

"But... but how? How can I when I'm the only heir? I cannot abandon the kingdom," he said quietly

"Trust me, I have my ways," she said with a knowing smile, leaning closer and wrapping her arms around her son, giving him a tight, squeezing hug

"I promise you, I have my ways,"

Tristan nodded slowly, sniffing and giving her one last hug before squeezing his eyes shut

He rose to his feet slowly, knowing what he had to do and racing down the stairs

He left the palace through the stables, racing on foot toward the guest house that he had set Liam up in

He rapped quickly on the door, waiting for an answer

The moment the door opened and he saw Liam's face he threw his arms around his neck, letting out another sob as he crashed into the smaller prince

Closing his eyes in understanding, Liam pulled him in closer, dragging him into the guest house and shutting the door behind them

~+~

"You are going to end up childless and alone," the queen accused as she started across at the king

"It's not a problem, we still have time, we'll find a new heir if we have to, or just wait, I guarantee you he will not abandon his kingdom over something so trivial,"

"So true love is trivial then," she mused

"Of course,"

"HM, then I feel almost bad for selling him off to the other kingdom,"

"You've done what!?" the king shouted

"It is obvious that Tristan wasn't going to stay here with you, acting like a tyrant, and his true love threatened to lose his head if he ever goes near him again, and yet he was reluctant to leave this place because he knew that he was the only heir, so I merely released him of those responsibilities and offered Prince Liam a dowry for marrying him, Tristan belongs to them now,"

A wide range of emotions flickered across the king's face before he rose to his feet, finally settling on anger

"Then have the carriage stopped! I will not sell my son!" he shouted

"Even though he chooses to love someone you don't approve of?"

"Yes!"

"Even if letting him come back would mean you would have to be tolerable and tolerant to his fiancé?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Even if-"

"Marissa stop with the variables and get me my son back!" he shouted

The queen, all-knowing, gave a small smile and walked right past him

"Go tell him yourself," she replied with a cheeky smirk

The king was stunned for a brief moment before racing out of the castle as quickly as he could

He didn't wait to have a horse saddled, and merely ran as fast as possible towards the carriage currently being loaded

Upon seeing the sight of his son, he sprinted even faster, despite the ache in his legs begging him to slow down

"Tristan!!" he shouted

"Tristan!!"

Tristan looked up from the trunk being loaded into the carriage and stared at him in confusion

"Father?"

"Don't leave," he said quickly

"I-"

"Don't leave, you and your... fiancé... are more than welcome here, anytime, just please... do not make me lose both of my sons in two months," he said quietly

Things were quiet for a moment, tears welling up in the prince's eyes as he rushed forward and gave his father a tight hug, squeezing his eyes shut

"Are you sure?"

"Yes of course... of course I'm sure... forgive me my son... please by the almighty God and Goddess, please forgive me,"

Tristan sniffed, nodding slowly and squeezing tightly back

"Of course I forgive you," he breathed in answer

The kingdom still mourned Prince Isaac, even years later

But soon they had other, happier things to focus on as well

Prince Tristan's wedding the following spring was the most beautiful they had ever seen

And the birth of his and Prince Liam's first-born daughter the first of many children- later that summer was equally as celebrated

Prince Tristan became known as one of the most amazing figures in the royal line, for he had done two impossible things

Later on in his life, he had handed the crown over to his first-born daughter- unwed though she was, not his first-born son

But perhaps his greatest feat, even more amazing than that, had been changing his father's mind

Because of the queen and her quick-witted plan, as well as the unwillingness Prince Tristan had to let go of the one he loved, the peace treaty between the two kingdoms held true from that moment on

And never again did the king make a judgment on anyone who wished to marry in his kingdom- no matter who they were, or where they were from

The Fix-It Phoenix

Once upon a time

In a land full of true love

There lived a phoenix by the name of Nykol

Nykol has had three lifetimes now and each one has been vastly different from the last

Her goals, her projects, her ideas all different

But this one, she figures, may just be the most difficult she'll ever have

For this one, she has decided to become a matchmaker

Oh not your average matchmaker obviously

A very special matchmaker

For phoenixes have the ability to read people's souls, to see into their deepest cores and know what lies beneath

And Nykol is no exception to this rule

So she's decided to use that ability to the greater good

After all, have you any idea how many problems in the world are caused out of misguided romance?

If she could fix THAT, she could surely fix just about anything else

It was like pulling hair out by the root

Of course, this would NOT be an easy journey

In fact, it would probably be more full of frustration than any other, but she managed anyway

Her first project was a couple she had been keeping an eye on since her last lifetime

For some reason, no matter how close they come to actually, finally, telling each other the truth about their feelings neither ever managed to come right out and own up to it

She decided that was going to have to change, before the worst happens of course

And so she put her expert skills to work and put a little extra surveillance on the couple

And once she had the information she needed... well, then she could put her plans to work

It's important to note, of course, that phoenixes are a very special kind of species and their ability to read people's hearts is almost unrivaled

Thus

Leave things to the professionals, do not try this at home

She walked quite simply over to the couple, knowing that one wanted to be romanced while the other simply wanted to be fed, and placed two cards in front of them- each from the other, invitations to meet at a restaurant that night at seven

It was a boringly old trick but it seemed to work like a charm even still so she kept it in her arsenal

The next pair was a little more difficult, given that they didn't know each other yet

There had to be a good way to introduce these two, but they were getting ready to leave the coffee shop they were at any moment now, likely never to see each other again

Because the thing is that although Cupids had a celestial quality to them, they couldn't control fate, nor were they even allowed witness to plans written down for all of those meant to fall in love or destined to be together

In a way, she was winging it just like anybody else, she just happened to have slightly more informed sources and more advanced tools to work with in order to clear up this extreme level of stupidity

There was only so much pining she could witness before she very well and truly was done with things

"What is he putting in his mouth?" Nykol muttered to herself as she glanced up over the very non-conspicuous menu she was pretending to look at

"Oh... oh he is NOT going to try to put six pickle chips in his mouth at once..."

Of course he was going to try to put six pickle chips in his mouth at once, because if she wasn't saving these people from their lack of romantic ingenuity she was saving them from death's door by means of idiocy

Although...

She realized, as the guy three tables across from her added a seventh pickle chip to the growing pile- it looked almost as if he was trying to impress someone- that maybe this was just the interlude she needed

Getting up, she walked towards the counter where a rather handsome paramedic was finishing his coffee

Glancing at her watch and then at the guy at the table, who was just now attempting to swallow the huge bundle of sour vegetables

"Three... two.... one..."

COUGH-HACK-COUGH

There it was

Clearing her throat, she gently tapped on Handsome Paramedic's arm, and upon having his attention, directed him with complete lack of amusement towards currently-choking-pickle-guy

Handsome Paramedic nearly fell off of his high-top chair in an effort to go rescue the guy from his own problems

OK so maybe that one was pretty easy, fate pretty much took care of that all by itself

The next one, she knew, was not that easy

A blind date with a couple who had been doing the "on again/off again" dance for three years with each other

Frankly, Nykol just wasn't buying it

What they were doing was making it impossible for them to find true love

Naturally she was going to have to fix this

So she waited at the restaurant for about twenty minutes before the first of the couple walked in- ah, the girl, perfect

With barely any acting needed at all, Nykol made up some excuse for the girl to get up and walk away, and without even having to use her phoenix powers, she could immediately tell that Blind-Date-Girl was a million times more suited to Violet-Dress-Girl at the bar than the frog she was currently almost-kind-of-dating

It didn't take much for her to "Casually" bump Blind-Date-Girl into Violet-Dress-Girl, thus spilling Blind-Date-Girl's drink all over Violet-Dress-Girl

By the time Blind-Date-Girl's date showed up, he was an hour later and his would-be date had already been gone for two

Of course there were some harder cases

The cheerleader who couldn't make up her mind between the jock and the nerd

The mermaid who had fallen in love with an elf but had no way of being on land for extended periods of time

The goblin who was hopelessly in love with a unicorn

They had required skill and conversation and truly making an effort at getting the two of them together

And it wasn't that Nykol hated difficult cases, she always loved hearing more from her clients

But there would just always be a special place in her heart for the easy ones

The soulmates who knew each other from across the room without even really realizing it

The princess and the merman for example, all that had taken was just introducing them to each other and a decade later they were celebrating the birth of their sixth child

Another of her personal favorites was the owl and the rabbit, now THERE was a story and a half!

They met during their childhood years in their human forms and it had taken an hour of explaining that before either of them understood and actually took the other up on their offer of a first date

But perhaps the one she treasured most, the one she took the most pride in, was the werewolf and the bird

The hilarity behind it was that they didn't even really need her help

She had only given the tiniest push after all

The werewolf was a skittish, shaky little thing who hated being alone

The bird happened to be a therapist

She thought hey, this must be Kismet, and with barely a word, one day, she took the werewolf by the arm- despite his protests about his groceries being left in the car- and lead him toward the building

All she had to do was deposit him in the office and three months later they were married with twins

Seriously

It was THAT easy

It wasn't that she prided herself on SPEED

She prided herself on ACCURACY

And if the decades- sometimes centuries- long marriages and partnerships this produced spoke at all of her skill...

She was pretty sure she wasn't going to lose her track record just because of a quick wedding or a strange meeting or anything like that

And so, it's with all of this in mind that she continues her quest

Not so much to fill the world with true love as it is to rid the world of mind-numbing stupidity

She was just about to head over to the bookstore to check on the faery that was hopelessly head-over-heels for her co-worker, when she heard the telltale groan of someone in love having done something stupid

"I can't believe I lost the ring..." he muttered

Nykol shook her head slowly, running a hand down her face and heading his way

Time to clean up another mess

The Flames And The Waves

Once upon a time

In a land unfamiliar to most

There lived a girl

Her name was Carmella, and she was a daughter of Cancer

For you see, once upon a time, the Zodiac was very different than it is today

Once upon a time the astrological signs had a much smaller gathering of souls than they do today and being born to one of the signs was much more important than it is now

Carmella was a sixth-generation Cancer

And she fell in love with Aaron, a sixth-generation Aries

The Zodiac was upset because Aries and Cancer are the least compatible of all the signs in astrology

And a union between them would surely bring about nothing but disaster

But Aaron and Carmella didn't care

They were so in love

They didn't mind each other the way people always predicted they would

And they weren't so unlike as people assumed they would because of their predecessors

Aaron had a gentle side made up of compassion and kindness and a love for the innocent things in life

And Carmella had a temper capable of leveling the earth when it was struck hard enough

But no one seemed to care

Because a son of Aries and a daughter of Cancer must surely be a disaster

"Is this your noble steed?" Carmella giggled as she stared at the dog in front of her

A huge Rottweiler who easily stood as tall as she did when he was on his hind legs

"He's my teddy bear, he's about as violent as a marshmallow," Aaron laughed in reply as he sat down in the grass next to her

"I'm sure he is," she cooed, leaning up and scruffing beneath the dog's chin

"And your little yap-per is where?" he asked

"In the basket," Carmella hummed back

Without much caution, he opened the picnic basket beside her and was pounced on by a tiny Yorkie, who barked at him like he was a personal offense to the world at large, and growled and grunted as if the very safety of this planet rested in her paws

"Wow! I'd love if Rex would be an attack dog like this! Can you try Rex?" he asked rhetorically, looking over his shoulder to find that the Rottweiler, Rex, had already given in and was on his back, kicking his feet in the air childishly and panting like a dehydrated horse as he squirmed around in delight from Carmella petting him

Carmella just smiled and laughed, shaking her head

"It's OK, I like teddy bears in wolf's clothing,"

Aaron glanced up at her, chuckling and looking at the ground

"You have dimples!" Carmella gasped, leaning closer and forcing his chin up so she could get a better look at his grin

"And bunny teeth!"

"Stop, stop," Aaron laughed, tossing his head back and flopping backwards as he let the sun bathe heat over his body

"How can I stop? Your wolf's clothing is getting thinner, I'm starting to see the teddy bear more and more each day," she replied as she swung her legs over his stomach and playfully pinned his hands above his head

"And it looks like you're a bit of a wolf yourself, hiding under the face of a lamb," he hummed, not bothering to even attempt to move

"Isn't that always how it works?" she smiled, leaning down and pressing a gentle, hesitant kiss to his lips

"Something like that," he hummed back, leaning up for another kiss and carefully lifting his shoulders as well to bring his body closer to her without disturbing the position of his hands

"I have to go soon," he said softly

Carmella frowned, releasing his hands and standing up without much warning

"Again? You keep doing this to me," she said softly

"Not at all, if I had my choice I'd stay here with you," Aaron replied, laying on his stomach and wrapping his hand lightly around her ankle

"Then make a choice," she said quietly

"It isn't that simple and you know that, it's .... it's in my blood Car, I can't fight it, my nature is too strong, just as your nature is for you, don't try to pretend it isn't,"

"But I LIKE my nature," she argued, turning around and raking her long ginger hair behind her ears as the wind gushed around it

"Do you?" Aaron asked quietly, rising to his feet and stepping closer to her

"I do, but you seem to resent yours," she explained, glancing at him, searching his eyes as the wind bellowed against his long black locks, tied together in a single ponytail

"I resent not being able to be with you, every waking moment of my life, war and fighting and anger... who would make a choice for that? When at home, I have beauty and love and warmth," he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, cupping his hand under her head and leaning down to press their foreheads together

"Who wouldn't choose you ... over a pointless war?"

"Then make the choice," she begged quietly, not daring to move

"I can't, you know I can't, you know what happens if I let myself stay stagnant... it's better I work off my aggression fighting a stranger's violence than being too near to you, I wouldn't want you to see me like that,"

"We all have ugliness Aaron... but we all have beauty too," she sighed

"So keep my beauty safe for me, and I'll try to stave off the ugliness as long as I can,"

She shook her head, breathing in his very breath and staring at his closed eyes

"Don't.... don't stay away,"

"Never," he promised

"I'll be waiting,"

"I know,"

"I love you,"

"I love you too,"

That day was the last time they saw each other for the next week

It was a short time, all things considered

An incredibly short time

But even in the shortest amount of time terrible things can happen

Something that Carmella learned all too easily on the evening of the sixth day

For on her way home that evening, she found herself unable to cross toward the building she shared with Aaron

She could see it

She could see what was only a few yards in front of her now

But she couldn't move her feet, and she couldn't reach out and touch it

"What... what's happening to me?" she breathed

"It isn't you dear, it's this place,"

Turning on her heel, Carmella felt her stomach sink

"M-Mother? What's happening?"

"We've sealed this part of town dear, sealed it from you," she explained

"You can't... why!? You can't do that to me! This is my home!" she shouted

"Not anymore dear, we've moved your things away, and now it's time for you to come home with us," her mother said evenly

"You can't... you can't hate Aaron that much.... how could you? How could you...?"

"It's not the boy we hate, it's what he's doing to you, what he WILL do to you, Aries and Cancer are not meant for one another, he will break your heart Carmella, as sure as I'm standing here."

"He won't have the chance, you're already doing it," Carmella said quietly, wrapping her arms around herself and shivering as the rain poured down around them

"I'm sorry dear, but it's for your own good, it's for everyone's own good, you are this generation's only Cancer daughter, you're needed, you're valuable,"

"But .... what will he think? I said... I said I'd be home, waiting for him, what will he think of he can't find me?"

"That isn't our problem,"

She felt the rain around her stop and looked up, seeing an umbrella hanging above her head and glancing down to see one of the daughters of Capricorn standing by her side

"Cassidy.... please go away," she said quietly, moving out from beneath the umbrella and reaching her hand forward, but it was like a wall was there

A huge, invisible wall, that she could touch but not see

"He won't be able to see you, you know, he won't be able to see anything this side of the barrier, so standing here, waiting on him, delaying the inevitable, it's useless,"

Carmella shuddered, reaching out again desperately and trying to grasp at the wall- despite there being nothing to hold onto- as she felt familiar hands wrap around her shoulder's

Her mother's, then Cassidy's, and her father's... more and more people were seeming to come out just to drag her away and within time she gave up fighting, they were outnumbering her, overpowering her, and she had nothing left to fight with

And so she left, looking over her shoulder and feeling the tears well up in her eyes

She didn't know it, she couldn't see it, but Aaron had brought her flowers

He had raced up the stairs to the apartment, swung the door open, and found it empty

No one but his dog there to greet him

He had seen the key on the counter

He had seen the noticeable emptiness of the room

And he had dropped the flowers and fallen to his knees as the realization hit him that he had been left behind

It hit him that this had been the last time

His last mistake

She had asked him to stay and when he didn't, she had left like a ghost

And the son of Aries sobbed brokenly at that realization at the knowledge that this was all truly his fault, his biology, his nature, his wrongness

And it was a sobering thought

It was a terrifying thought

It was a thought that left him lying on the ground with aching ribs and flushed red skin

Because the only thing worse than seeing your love destroyed in front of you, is knowing that you're the one who destroyed it

A scream of agony ripped from his throat, but Carmella- already so far away- couldn't hear it

That night she did not sleep

Nor the next

Nor the next

And on the fourth night she realized that things would not get better

No matter what her parents said

No matter what her family or the town or anyone or everyone else said

This heartache would never heal

Not this one

Not this time

The circumstances were too raw and unholy for it to ever scar over the way any heartache should

And so she rose from her bed, pulled her robe from the coat rack, and left

She wandered aimlessly down the streets, hugging her robe to keep the cold away, and felt like gagging as the memory of Aaron's warm skin flooded her mind

Cancers had a cold nature

All water signs did

But Aaron was fire incarnate

Aries was the fire spirit to end all fire

And Aaron embodied the heat beautifully

The flames weren't scary

They didn't burn

They were warm like a lantern and she was the moth always drawn to the flame within it

Now with no lantern, no flame to fly to, the little moth felt her wings begin to freeze over

But it wasn't the cruelty of the weather or even her own chilled blood that created such a draft

It was the pain

The pain of being left alone, of knowing that her soulmate would never be with her again, of being well and truly uprooted from her rightful place, that flooded with her such a coldness

She didn't even realize what direction she was walking in until she was already there

Finding her toes being licked by the waves of the sea

She walked further and further into the water and felt increasingly ill

The cold water made her teeth chatter, her bones quiver, and her skin break into a scattered rash of goosebumps

But she kept going, no matter how cold it got, for it was the only comfort she had left

And no matter how badly she wished it were flames, she walked willingly into the waves

She swam and swam, for the sea was the only place she could feel at home

She swam and swam, for the water was the only comforting thing she had left

She swam and swam, for the ocean's salt water created a comfortable place for her tears to land

And after she had been swimming for so much longer than she ever realized she could swim before, she finally came to a stop

She came to rest at a pier that was so far away, so foreign to her, that she didn't recognize a single thing around her

"What are you doing here?" she heard, looking up slowly and seeing a beautiful woman with dark tan skin and long black curls standing before her

"I've been swimming," Carmella answered tiredly

"I get that little lass, but why've you been swimming so much? You aren't merfolk, and you certainly aren't seal-folk, so what are you?"

Carmella blinked a little clearer and then realized exactly where she was

"I'm on Selkie Isle.... aren't I?" she asked quietly

"Aye," the woman before her replied, staring at her for another long moment before sighing, stuffing the large grey clump in her hands that Carmella assumed to be her sealskin beneath the pier

"Come on then, let's get you out of the water," she said as she reached out and helped Carmella to her feet, allowing the daughter of Cancer to lean on her as she dragged her up the beach

When they finally stopped walking they were in a small town-like structure, not so unlike the one Carmella had come from, and the redhead found herself sitting at a kitchen table with a bowl of stew in front of her

"Eat, ya' look like a ghost," the woman demanded as she turned back to the stove to take the pot off of the burner

"Thank you," Carmella said quietly

"Aye," the woman answered vaguely

For a long while, they were silent

Carmella ate and the woman cleaned and she had even loaned Carmella one of the long dress shirts like the one she was wearing so that she could dry Carmella's wet clothes

Then, Carmella spoke again

"What's your name?"

There was a pause, no answer coming at first, and then...

"Tamsin,"

"Tamsin," she repeated slowly, the name heavy on her tongue

"Why are you helping me Tamsin?"

"Maybe it's just selkie manners but I believe this is where you introduce yourself," Tamsin said simply

"Carmella, a daughter of Cancer,"

Tamsin clicked her tongue, turning around slowly and bracing her arms on the counter behind her

"You want to know why I'm helping you, Daughter Of Cancer."

"Yes Ma'am," she said quietly

"Because I recognize you, I recognize your face, not.... YOUR face... but the face you have now, I recognize the stains on it, the redness, the swollen eyes... I know heartache when I see it Carmella,"

"And? So?"

"And, so, I know what it's like, and how much you wish you could drown yourself in your mothering waters just to make the pounding in your head stop, just to drown out the pain, we're born of the water you and I, but we're no less apt to drowning in it,"

"So you wanted to save my life?" she asked slowly

"No, ... yes, maybe, I don't know.... why is your heart-broken Carmella? Tell me what happened to it,"

Carmella was quiet for a moment, taking in a breath and huddling closer to the empty bowl on the table as she began to recite the story from the beginning

The story of her and Aaron

The story of love

The story of heartache

Right from the beginning

When it was over Tamsin looked nostalgic and contemplative, she said nothing at first before licking her lips and speaking

"Is that all?"

Carmella jerked in surprise, not having expected such a cold response

"A bit of magic keeping you apart, is that really all? I lost my love to a much crueler death than that, there is no getting him back, not in this lifetime anyway, so let me ask you, is that all?"

Carmella hung her head, swallowing as guilt swam around her and pulled at her from every angle

"Take this, splash it across that magical barrier you're so petrified of and it'll dissolve away," she instructed, handing Carmella a small bottle of lavender colored liquid

"What is it?" she asked after a moment

"Does that matter?" Tamsin replied briskly

Carmella looked down and the selkie sighed, stepping forward and resting a hand on her shoulder

"Go under the pier, there's a cave there, it'll take you closer to where you need to go,"

She nodded slowly, staring down for a moment longer before looking back up at her

"Thank you, Tamsin,"

The seal-woman gave a non-committal shrug and went back to the counter, staring outside at the moon and feeling her grip on the counter edge tighten

"Go, before it gets too late," she ordered

Carmella nodded slowly, thanked her again, and disappeared out of the cottage

Tamsin watched her go

Watched her climb back into the water and disappear beneath the surface

And after a moment of staying away she eventually concluded that Carmella had taken her advice and turned the sink on, getting an apple from the bowl beside her and beginning to peel it

She watched, despite knowing she would see nothing, but finally turning away to the trash can

She knew she would see something sooner or later, it was just a waiting game now

And speaking of waiting, Carmella had to wait too

For once she was there, actually standing in front of the apartment, bottle in hand as she stared at the door

She didn't know quite what to do

And so for a moment she did nothing at all

Nothing but stand

And then, when she thought the silence was well and truly going to kill her, she knocked

It only took a moment for the door to swing open and Aaron's tear-streaked face to stare at her in utter surprise

"There's been a mistake," she said quietly

Aaron shook his head terribly, reaching out and wrapping her in a tight hug, drawing her forward and squeezing protectively

"Never again," he breathed

"Aaron, listen to me, that's not what happened,"

"Never again," he repeated

"Please it wasn't you, it wasn't your fault I-"

"Please," he breathed, kicking the door shut and inhaling her deeply as he stroked her hair

"I don't want to... I don't need to hear it now, just... I just need you,"

There was a pause as she wrapped her arms around him in return, inhaling deeply and nodding in agreement

"I just need you..."

The Forest Elf

Once upon a time

In a land quite dreary

There lived a girl by the name of Alice

Alice was a curious sort who grew bored of the simplicities of life around her

Now this may sound like a familiar tale, but one would find upon meeting Alice, that she's not at all like the girl who fell down the rabbit's hole into Wonderland

Well, maybe a bit like her, but her story, now, THAT is truly different

Sure it may start much the same way, a boring day leads a curious girl into the woods, some say she even followed a rabbit there, but it wasn't a rabbit hole that this Alice stumbled upon

Why, THIS Alice found something much more interesting

This Alice found an egg

It was a large egg, at least six times bigger than that of a chicken's

And rather than having a smooth white shell, it was a mossy green, hard-as-nails shell

At first Alice didn't know what to do with it

She didn't exactly feel right just leaving the egg flat in the middle of the forest like this, it was right in the pathway and upon closer inspection Alice even found that the egg had a crack running down one side

Feeling more and more concerned by the moment, Alice decided to pick up the egg- with great effort (it was quite heavy!) and attempt to take it somewhere safe

Of course she couldn't very well take it back home, she didn't even know what hatched out of eggs this size but she was fairly certain that she didn't want whatever it was in the house

She managed to get all of four feet from where she originally spotted the egg before the huge thing started to twitch in her arm

And being a rather intelligent girl, she knew that she'd better set the egg down- right then and right there

The egg rattled and shook, a crack forming down the opposite side of the first, and absently Alice wondered what could be in this egg

Perhaps, she thought, an ostrich

She knew that ostriches weren't native to the area of course, but then she figured, neither was anything else that could have laid an egg of this size

Another crack formed

And then another

And then another

And finally, after what felt like an eternity of waiting, a piece of the egg broke off the top and crumbled to the ground, and emerging from the shell was ....

A baby dragon

Alice gasped in surprise and amazement as the tiny creature dug the rest of the way out of the egg and shook off any remaining pieces, taking a few fragile steps forward and sitting in the middle of the ground

There was silence for a small moment before the dragon started to thrill, chirping out and looking around the area

Alice fully expected a massive mother dragon to fly out from somewhere at any moment... but no such thing happened

The baby dragon's chirping got louder and more insistent but still nothing happened

Finally the chick's little thrills began to turn less curious and more... sad....

And despite her best senses, Alice felt sorry for the little creature and walked forward, scooping up the dragon in her arms

"Don't worry little one, we're going to find your mother," she assured

The dragon purred, curling up in Alice's arms as she began the journey

It's important to note that she had no idea where she was going

Alice had never been in this forest before and certainly not nearly so deep in it

And every step she took pulled her a step further and further away from her home, yet she was undeterred

For hours she wandered aimlessly through the forest, carrying the little dragon and searching for any indication of where she might find the baby's mother

And for many hours, she found nothing

However, finally, eventually.... she did

It was nearing sunset and she had long since set the baby dragon in her backpack to rest in order to relieve some of the pressure on her arms

Of course it was starting to become clear the further and longer she walked that she was going to have to stop and rest for the night sometime soon, she couldn't see in the dark after all

The problem was that she didn't have the foggiest clue of WHERE to stop and rest, all of the forest looked the same to her

"If only I knew of a good place," she mused to herself, glancing around and feeling her heart sink as it grew darker and darker still

"What is it you need human child?" came a voice, causing Alice to turn around and stare up at a beautiful woman who seemed to have emerged from nowhere at all

"I need to find a place to stop and rest," she explained

"And why are you stopping and resting in the forest, so far away from your human home?" she asked

"Because I need to find the mother of this baby dragon, I can't leave her all alone to fend for herself, especially with night approaching,"

The woman stared at Alice curiously for a moment before giving a soft smile and offering her hand

"I am Emma of the forest, a Wood Nymph, I believe the dragon you're looking for is around that corner, atop that hill there, I believe Cora is the one you're looking for," the Nymph explained

Alice looked up, feeling her heart sink when she saw just how far away the mountaintop was

"I see, thank you for your help," Alice said with a polite smile, turning away to start walking again

"The path to the mountain doesn't concern you? It'll take many days and much strength for you to get to the cave that you need to find," Emma noted

"I understand, but I need to get this baby dragon home, that's the priority," she explained

The Wood Nymph seemed taken aback by this and was quiet for a long moment as the human began walking toward the mountain again

"Wait," she called out, effectively stopping the human girl in her tracks

"Take this," she added, crossing closer and setting a small orb in the center of Alice's hand

"What is it?" she asked curiously

"This will shorten your journey and take you straight to the top of the mountain," she explained

Alice was a little skeptical of it at first, but decided that there was really no reason not to trust her

"What do I do?"

"Simply hold the orb in your hand, squeeze it tight, and think of where you wish to go,"

Alice gave a nod, squeezing the orb and closing her eyes

"Thank you!" she called as a wind suddenly swept up around her, a deep bellowing gust that only seemed to fade a moment later when it disappeared completely

Emma smiled fondly at the empty space in front of her and wandered back to where she had come from before, knowing within reason that the other girl had made the journey safely

Alice, in the meantime, was a little less sure

After all it wasn't often that you wake up face down outside of a cave and call that a safe journey

Upon realizing exactly where she was, however, Alice quickly rose to her feet, taking a few steps into the cave and looking around

Taking a breath, she stepped a little more into the cave and pulled her backpack to the side, lifting the flap open and reaching down

She felt the little dragon beginning to move and smiled as she pulled the chick out of her bag, setting the newborn in the center of the cave

And when she looked back up, she found herself being stared at by a set of huge burning golden eyes

Alice gulped, watching as a massive claw reached out and gently scooted the baby dragon into the shadows where the rest of the larger dragon was hiding

"Well if that's all I really should be going now," she said quickly

There was a deep, rumbling sound throughout the cave, followed by a thickly said "Thank you..."

"O-Oh me? Thank... thank me? Well... you're welcome," she said with a small smile

"No.... thank you," she insisted, pushing towards her a strange looking orb, at least twice the size of the last one

Naturally, Alice assumed this was another way back down the mountain, and before the dragon could stop her, she picked up the orb, closed her eyes, and picked where she wanted to go

Unfortunately, as she would soon find out, that is not actually what the orb did

For when she opened her eyes again, Alice didn't find herself back in the human realm as she thought she would have

Instead she found herself in a dark, damp part of the forest where not a single hint of the sunlight shown, only the light of the fireflies seemed to light up the space

"I see the dragon Cora has sent you here," she heard, looking up and staring in awe at the bright and beautifully colored bird before her

"A Phoenix..." she breathed

"Yes, I am a Phoenix," the bird chuckled, though his beak didn't move, it was all more ... telepathic

"I have heard of your journey, from the lady Emma, and now from the dragon Cora, it is not often that those two are impressed,"

Alice stared at him strangely but decided to go along with this anyway

"You must be very special for Cora to have sent you here, tell me, do you wish for your life to change?"

Alice didn't waste a single second

"Yes,"

And so with a smile, the Phoenix flew from his perch to rest on the rock in front of her

"Then so it shall be," he said

Alice felt her eyes closing as a strange, warm feeling spread throughout her entire being and when she opened them again, something had changed

It wasn't something she could see at first, spending quite a bit of time in the forest simply getting to know it, but when she approached the river, she found something had changed after all

It was a small, subtle detail but her ears were pointed

Alice had become an elf

Elves are amazing creatures, guardians of the forests and the spirits within them, and Alice was more than happy to look over the residents of the forest with her newfound magic and longevity

And when fall came around and it began approaching the winter, Alice found herself doing something that many, many elves before her strived to do

She applied at Santa's Workshop

It wasn't the forest, but it was a seasonal thing and after all, Alice was a curious girl, she could never stay in the same place for too long

The Ghost On Hill Street

Once upon a time

In a neighborhood very much like your own

There lived a man

He was a bit of a strange man

His neighbors knew very little about him, other than the fact that he was very odd

They never saw him during the day but he was often seen out at night, getting the mail or walking his dog or doing any number of normal things they would all do during the day

He was seen most often during the holidays- especially Halloween, when he was out frequently both during the day and the night putting up decorations, coming home with various amounts of supplies, out testing his costume and blaring spooky music all hours of the day and night

No one really knew what he was, but they thought he surely couldn't be human

Some thought he was a vampire, but on Halloween night they could see him checking his reflection to make sure his costume fit well

Others thought he was a werewolf, but one night he was caught walking his dog on the full moon and seemed completely normal

Others still thought he was a witch, but they all thought it was a little peculiar that the only time he was ever seen with a broom was when he swept the porch

There was only one person, as a matter of fact, who knew for sure what the mysterious neighbor was

This person's name was Patrick, and he had been in this neighborhood long before the mysterious night neighbor moved in

He finally decided however, to do something that he had never done before:

To introduce himself to his neighbor

"Need any help with that?"

At the sound of Patrick's voice, the strange man on Hill Street looked up from the packages he was trying to carry and gave a small nod

"Would you?" he asked shyly

"Of course, just let me get one here," Patrick smiled back, taking a box off of the porch and following the other man towards the garage

"I'm Patrick by the way, what's your name?" he asked a moment later

"O-Oh um... I'm Tristan, I guess I haven't done that great with introducing myself huh? I'm just... not great with people I guess," he said softly

Patrick shrugged, shaking his head and giving him a small smile

"Nonsense, it's fine and it can't really be helped anyway, you are who you are, there's nothing wrong with that," he insisted

Tristan listened to that carefully, seeming to absorb that information as he lead the other male into the house

As soon as the door was opened a massive German Shepherd came bounding around the corner, aiming to tackle Tristan

He quickly set the box down on the floor and laughed as he caught the dog with ease, snuggling her happily

Noticing that they were momentarily absorbed, Patrick took the opportunity to shut the door with his foot and set down his box as well

He also decided to take this chance to look around the kitchen, which was- as he suspected- fairly normal

There were dishes in the sink and magnets on the fridge and a few stray odds and ends on the counter, just like anyone else's

Of course there were also mason jars with creepy Halloween-esque labels on them drying in the dish rack and little bat clips on the fridge holding the grocery list in place

He hadn't expected much differently

"Sorry Patrick, this is my girl Elizabeth,"

Which Patrick thought was a strange name for a dog really but it sort of fit, it fit all of the other strange things about Tristan

"Well it's a pleasure to meet you Elizabeth," Patrick winked

The dog gave a bark of seeming approval and wagged her tail staring at him for a long moment before looking back at Tristan

"Don't worry about her, she's shy around strangers," he shrugged without concern

"It's fine, don't worry about it really," Patrick grinned, rubbing his neck a bit shyly

"Do you um... want to maybe... get dinner? Or... well.. I guess it's more like breakfast for you,"

Tristan glanced at the clock, noticing it was still only eight o'clock, he really hadn't been up that long yet but he figured he could eat

Besides, there was no way he'd pass up the opportunity to spend more time with Patrick, Tristan was... lonely, chronically and tragically lonely, and Patrick was cute and seemed rather good-natured, Tristan wanted to spend bounds more time with him

And much to his delighted surprise, as he found out in the coming days, Patrick wanted to spend more time with him as well

In fact over the next several months the two became rather inseparable

They did nearly everything together and shared most of the same interests and Patrick was over visiting Tristan more times than he wasn't

In fact it was growing increasingly stranger for the two of them to be away from each other

Patrick didn't seem to mind adjusting whatever schedule he had to suit Tristan's late night adventures and that was ... amazing and incredible and something no one else had ever done for him before

He never quite knew how to handle that in all honesty

Not that it really mattered he supposed, he was always somewhat... intoxicated being around Patrick, it was really the only term he could think to use for those feelings at least...

"Hey, I have to go for a little bit OK? I'll be back before midnight, I promise," Patrick said suddenly one evening

Tristan had gotten rather used to just... keeping him there, cuddling with him, snuggling with him, falling asleep with something other than an empty bed for once

Of course midnight wasn't anywhere NEAR his usual bedtime but still...

"I promise, I'll only be gone a couple of hours OK? I'll bring back a surprise,"

Tristan sighed slightly, but gave an approving nod anyway, smiling softly

"Thanks,"

"Huh? For what?"

"For... not thinking there's anything wrong with me I guess," he said softly

"Of course there's nothing wrong with you, you're just being who you are and there's nothing wrong with that, nothing at all," Patrick promised

Tristan just smiled more, finally starting to feel happy again for the first time in what seemed like an eternity thanks to Patrick

"I'll be back soon," he promised again, kissing Tristan gently and waving to him as he headed out of the house

Tristan's heart was fluttering the entire time but he willed himself to stay put

And it seemed, interestingly, that Patrick was much more popular in the neighborhood than Tristan

After all it didn't seem that he had any trouble walking up to the door of the local seamstress and ringing the bell

"Minnie!!" he greeted with a bright grin

"Hello there Patrick," the girl greeted with a small laugh

"Is it ready yet?" Patrick asked excitedly

"Almost, it should be ready tomorrow,"

Many people in the neighborhood had the wrong idea about witches, not only could Patrick say with certainty that Tristan WASN'T one, he could also say with certainty that Minnie- petite, blond, puppy loving little Minnie in the long pink dresses- WAS a witch, and a good one at that

"I'm so excited, finally this is going to be real, I'll get to have a real, normal relationship with Tristan,"

"Don't get your hopes up, even without this problem Tristan is quite an odd duck," Minnie pointed out

Of course Patrick knew that, he knew what he was getting into, but he stayed quiet anyway, staring down at the thing on the table in front of him

"Go ahead and take a peek at the world's first synthetic body, make sure it's to your liking, you are going to spend the rest of your life with it after all aren't you?"

Patrick inhaled, giving a slow nod

"Yeah... if I'm lucky... do you think Tristan will like it?"

"I think he'll love it, how could he not?" Minnie shrugged back

"I hope you're right," Patrick sighed

"You do need to tell him though," Minnie shrugged

"What?"

"You know what, don't play dumb with me,"

"What's the point though? Why bother him with something that won't even be true much longer?"

"Because it's the right thing to do?"

Patrick shook his head again, giving a small smile

"I'll wait, it's not going to matter soon anyway, soon I'll have the body I need to make things with Tristan real, and I won't need to ever, ever tell him that I'm a ghost..."

The Goddess Of War

Once upon a time

An anciently long time ago

There lived a Goddess

Her name was Alayla, and she was the Goddess Of War

"Oh dear Alayla, please help me win this war, please help us protect our village," prayed the general

Alayla answered his prayers, appearing behind him and gently placing her hands on his shoulders before moving one down to cover his own hand and point it towards the map in front of him

"So you have prayed, and so you shall be answered, now, here is what you will do,"

She spoke slowly, surely, knowing that he couldn't see her, feel her, or hear her, no mortal could, but she could still help him, he would still sense her direction

"Back so soon?" she heard as she stepped back into the Heavens

"Yes, it was fairly easy tonight," she mused with a small shrug, smiling softly at the Goddess across from her

"What have you there Irayna?" she asked curiously, nodding towards the small bundle underneath a clock in the other woman's lap

Irayna was the Goddess Of Peace, and although many thought that she and Alayla would be natural enemies, they were actually very close friends

So close, in fact, that they regarded each other as sisters

"A rabbit! Oh aren't they cute?" the Goddess Of Peace cried as she moved the cloth away

"Adorable!" Alayla smiled, eagerly walking closer- careful not to move too far too fast, she didn't want to spook the skittish creature

"It's just so sad they have so many natural enemies, as much as I love having them here in the Heavens it's always sad that they don't live longer on earth," Irayna considered

"I could always do something to fix that, teach them to fight back," Alayla mused, wiggling her fingers suggestively

"No! You know I wouldn't want that," Irayna pouted as she hugged the rabbit closer

"Oh don't worry, I know," she chuckled, moving to sit beside the taller Goddess and reaching out, hesitating for a moment

"May I?"

"It's a spirit, don't worry," Irayna assured her, causing Alayla to smile as she reached out to gently pet the rabbit in her friend's lap

Alayla had to be careful not to touch gentle creatures- or any creature besides those she was trying to provoke that is- as any mortal being she touched would instinctively go to war with another

There was no need for rabbits in war

"I have to go," Irayna said with a sudden sigh, moving the rabbit into Alayla's lap and standing up upon hearing a prayer being sent her way

"Already? How long have you been here?" Alayla frowned

"Not that long, but it's OK, somebody has to clean up your messes," she teased, poking Alayla playfully on the nose before giving her dress a twirl and vanishing, disappearing from the Heavens

Alayla stared across at the empty space for a while before gently carding her fingers through the rabbit's fur

As much as she loved her power, delighting in the art of war and the strategy of battle, she couldn't help but envy Irayna's power for peace

Unlike her own, Irayna's power was seen as the ideal and was prayed to twice as often as Alayla's was

But it didn't matter she supposed, the less time she spent on earth the more time she could spend in the Heavens, and that was better anyway

"Ah... duty calls," she mused, giving the rabbit a soft kiss on the head before standing up and gently setting the forest-dweller on the ground before vanishing from the Heavens herself to make her way to earth

What she had hoped would be a true prayer to answer, however, turned out to be nothing more than a fight between children, and she couldn't help feeling annoyed that they had invoked her name for such a thing

She left without answering the call, for although she loved the necessity of conflict, there were some battles that simply didn't need to be fought, and she understood that

She would probably do better to send Irayna their way in all honesty....

But now right now, she had no immediate desire to return to the Heavens, and so instead she stepped just outside of the village she had been visiting, deciding to explore the forest

The plants were her favorite thing about Earth, one of the few things that she truly admired about the deeply flawed planet, and it was probably no coincidence that they were the only living things she could touch without inciting aggression and anger in them

She loved the peace that this brought, ironically enough, she loved the feeling of tree bark beneath her palms and flower petals against her fingertips, she could get lost in it

"Hello?"

Well, she could theoretically get lost in it

"Are you lost?"

She turned, staring in surprise at the human that had called out to her, because... humans couldn't see her

Mortals cannot see beings of the Other Realms unless they WANT to be seen...

It was then that she realized the plant she was touching at the moment was Mistletoe, which caused all who touched it to be visible to humans- whether they wanted to be or not

She realized though that she would have to say something, she couldn't just disappear, lest the human start stories about Fae Folk in the forest, and truthfully the Fae Folk had a hard enough time staying hidden as it was without Alayla adding to their problems....

So she picked a sprig of Mistletoe to keep herself visible and tried to come up with an explanation

"Oh... no I was just..."

"Exploring? I do that too," the human said with a soft smile

Alayla tucked a stray strand of dark hair behind her ear, glancing down at the basket he had abandoned on the ground and staring up at him in surprise

"Do you always come this far out to pick herbs? Don't you grow them in your village?" she asked curiously

"Yes and yes... I'm training to be an herbalist, I need to know about all of the herbs, not just the ones that we can grow in the village,"

"'All of them?" Alayla couldn't help but chuckle

After all, as a Goddess she knew that there were far too many herbs out there for any human to possibly learn about ALL of them

Even she had spent decades just trying to get a basic grasp on them- and that was truly saying something

There was no way he would be able to ever know everything about every herb but she admired his ambition

"That's quite some devotion you have there,"

"It's all I really care to do," the mortal shrugged back, bending down to pick at some herbs on the ground

"Really? You have no interest in battle?" she asked curiously, tilting her head to the side

"No, my father was a general, a great general at that, but I saw what it did to him, battle killed him long before he died, but that isn't what I want for myself, I want... I want something different, is that so wrong?" he asked, staring at her rather sincerely

"To want a life of peace? Of love? To just... marry someone who loves me and have children? Is that so wrong of me?"

"No," Alayla said quietly

"No it isn't wrong at all," she affirmed

That was the one thing that humans consistently never seemed to understand, their lives belonged to them and them alone

Not to parents or to generals or to emperors, not even to the Gods and Goddesses themselves, a human's life was their own and they had a right to do whatever they wanted with it, yet so many fell into the trap of giving in, and giving away their lives for a purpose they didn't truly believe in or want any part of...

"I'm glad you think that way, people usually tell me that I'm a fool, or a disgrace," he explained, giving his head a small shake and smiling kindly at her before holding his hand out towards her

"I'm Theodore,"

"Alayla, and they shouldn't say such awful lies, there's nothing wrong with wanting to be yourself," she offered, though she kept her hands to herself, she didn't want to touch him and turn him into a soldier, he was too gentle for that sort of life

"Thank you, I really do appreciate it... Alayla? Like the Goddess Of War? My father used to pray to her every morning and night," Theodore remembered fondly, and that... that truly took Alayla by surprise

She remembered the general he was speaking of, the man had prayed to her constantly from the first day he stepped onto the battlefield to the night he took his last breath

The man had spoken of his son, how he was proud that the boy was so naturally witty and intelligent, a strategist for sure he thought, but worried too, for the boy didn't have an aggressive bone in his body and the general worried that he would never be able to defend himself

"Watch over him Alayla, for me please," he had prayed on many occasions

But still, Alayla had never imagined that this was the boy, though he looked like a warrior- tall stature, firm bone structure, and muscles stacked leanly on his body- he was also so soft and kind that Alayla didn't quite know what to do with him

He must surely take after his mother

It seemed that Theodore finally realized she wasn't going to shake his hand and slowly shifted his hand behind his back, a hurt, rejected look crossing his face

"I've been handling Mistletoe," she said suddenly

"I didn't want to touch you with it on my hands, what if you touch food next?" she explained

That seemed to perk him up and he smiled brightly as he seemed to understand her warning

"I understand, don't worry about it," he assured her, smiling as he leaned down and gently plucked a flower from the bushes around them

Taking a step closer, he gently tucked the flower behind her ear, carefully avoiding touching her as he took a step back

"Consider it a handshake then," he said simply

Alayla blinked in surprise, unsure of how to process all of these... strange feelings she was suddenly encountering

Her heart was beating faster and her blood pressure was rising, but she couldn't tell why or what was causing it

"I should probably go," she said suddenly, licking her lips and frowning at the devastated look on his face

"But I'll be back tomorrow,"

She didn't know why she had just said that, but the way Theodore was suddenly beaming with happiness prevented her from taking it back

"Same time?" he asked curiously

"Same time," she confirmed

"OK then, see you tomorrow Goddess Of War," he said with a small wink, picking up his basket of herbs and heading back towards the village

Alayla took a nervous breath, she didn't know what to make of that, especially when she looked down and saw the flowers in the bushes beside her

They were purple roses...

That day presented a change in Alayla's life

From then on she went to visit Theodore every day, and eventually she found herself starting to truly develop a love for the earth, underneath the blanket of violence and hatred that had so infected the world

She found herself beginning to envy Irayna more and more, and becoming more and more discouraged with her own celestial gifts

She had thought the earth to be somewhat hopeless, but the more time she was spending there due to Theodore, the more she was realizing how wrong that was

It was a few weeks later that her life changed again, and what had seemed so innocent at the time turned into something that would haunt her nightmares for eternity

"You should really go back your village, it looks like it's going to rain soon," Alayla suggested as they walked through the forest, exploring the plants and checking on the animals as they did every day

"I should be the one saying that to you, and mark my words, one of these days I'm going to find YOUR village and start saying these these things to you," he teased

"Sure, someday," Alayla teased back with a small wink, she hadn't even noticed where they were walking honestly, as a new prayer suddenly came in through her mind

The thing about prayers is that when they're made the Gods and Goddesses that they're made to stop everything to hear them, they may not always attend to them straight away but they do hear them the moment they're addressed

This, as she soon came to find out, would come to be a terrible, terrible flaw... for as she tuned in to listen to the prayer, she failed to notice how close she and her mortal companion were to an open raveen, and within seconds of the prayer's end she heard a scream

Looking down, she felt her heart come to a near stop

Theodore had mis-stepped and had fallen down the hill, now lying unconscious at the bottom...

"Theodore!" she shouted, snapping back to reality as she skidded down the hill and rushed towards the human male, reaching out to shake him, only to be stopped by a loud shout

"Stop!" she heard, turning around and finding herself staring face to face with Irayna

"What are you doing Alayla!? Don't touch him!"

Alayla swallowed hard, drawing back into herself and holding her hands against her chest as she watched Irayna run forward to help him, to try to wake him

"I... I didn't-"

She cut herself off, shaking her head and running as far and as fast as she could, until finally coming to a halt in what seemed like an empty clearing

She was absolutely distraught with frustration, she knew now that she was falling in love with Theodore- if she hadn't already- but what kind of relationship could they possibly have where she couldn't touch him- where her touch was toxic?

Then again maybe not all was at a loss, her power was destructive but it was still just a power, it was still magic, and all magic could be controlled couldn't it?

Perhaps there was a way to limit this power, to control it...

With that thought in mind, she looked up, spotting a baby deer not far from where she was and rising to her feet

*'Control...'*she thought as she slowly approached the deer

'Please don't get aggressive... please... please....'

But no matter how much she tried to prevent it, the second she reached out and touched the fawn the creature became clearly angry, no longer the docile animal that had been grazing moments ago, the deer now seemed infuriated and looking for a target- any target- to attack

Thus was the effect on creatures who were not built for war, those who couldn't understand or tolerate the careful planning that Alayla was capable of introducing simply became mindlessly enraged and would go to war with anything and for any reason

"No..." she breathed, tears stinging at the corners of her eyes as she stared down at her hands

"Please no..."

Was this her curse?

Was she truly never going to be able to touch the man she had fallen in love with?

"Alayla!" she heard, glancing up and feeling her chest tighten at seeing Irayna rush towards her

"What has gotten into you all of a sudden!?" the Goddess Of Peace snapped, rushing to pick up the fawn that Alayla had touched and hugging the animal close, soothingly stroking the fawn's head and whispering soft, sweet encouragements

And Alayla watched with a breaking heart as the deer curled into Irayna's warmth, into her touch, soothed and calmed and at peace again

At peace...

And what was Alayla supposed to do to compete with that?

She was exactly what Theodore didn't want

Theodore wanted peace and love, a life without pain or suffering or battle

A life without war

And yet that was exactly what Alayla was: War

"I... I'm sorry... I didn't-"

"Didn't what? Didn't think about the consequences?" Irayna shouted

"Irayna... what... why are you being so cruel to me? What have I done?" she asked innocently

"You never think about the consequences of your actions Alayla! You're always... touching! Always touching the lives of these mortal beings, DESTROYING their lives! I have to come in after you and clean up your messes, create peace where you create war, and now you're just going about and haphazardly touching anyone and anything you feel like? You can't do that! You have to leave some things in this world untouched by your poison! Leave some things in this world to peace!"

"Poison?! You... you think my touch is poison?" she breathed

Irayna took a deep breath, her shoulders sagging and her expression void of anything but exhaustion and frustration

"Of course it is, Alayla, I love you, you know that I do, you're like a sister to me, but ... you do nothing but create war, don't you understand how toxic that is? Can't you realize that your touch is like a poison to the world? No not a poison... more like... a disease, because it doesn't stop with one touch, you touch and then that person goes out and creates war amongst more people, and they create more war and then they create more... it's endless, and you're the only person unaffected by it, you are the carrier of this disease Alayla, and you have to be extremely careful who you let it pass on to,"

Never in her life had Alayla felt so much pain as she did in that moment, even the prospect of Theodore being hurt didn't hold a candle to what she was feeling now

Irayna, the person she had always loved so much, valued as a sister, thought her touch was nothing better than a disease, thought she was spreading a poison....

And she didn't even care that her words had hurt Alayla

"I... I should go," she breathed, begging the tears not to fall

"You should, I'll clean up here," Irayna said calmly

And with one quick twirl Alayla was away from the mortal realm, back home in the Heavens at last, where she could breakdown and cry in peace

And oh did she cry

She cried so much, in fact, that it is believed her tears fell down from the heavens and filled an entire river

But that's another story for another time

Alayla cried and cried, she mourned everything that she had ever loved

She mourned the fact that she could never be with Theodore

She mourned Irayna and the hurtful words she had spoken

But most of all, she mourned for herself

For the things she could never have

She could never run through the forest and touch the deer or the rabbits, she could never wrap her arms around a mortal in a comforting embrace, and she could never lay her hands upon a lover, not a human one anyway

And that thought, the thought of all those things she hadn't known she had wanted that had just been taken away from her, it was such a devastating loss that all she could do was cry

"Alayla? What troubles you my sister?" she heard, glancing up and sniffing quietly as she stared up at her brother, Than, the God Of Death

Than was older than nearly all of them, he had been here since the beginning and he would never die the way some of the others might

For life itself could not exist without death, and death could not exist without life

"Oh Brother, I've fallen in love," she sobbed, curling harder into herself as Than moved closer and gently wrapped an arm around her shoulders

"I see, that is very unfortunate indeed,"

"No, you don't understand," she cried

"I've fallen in love with a mortal, I cannot love him for I cannot touch him, if I touch him, I'll destroy him, he's a kind and gentle soul, devoid of war, I cannot infect him this way,"

"No my dear, I understand perfectly," Than said quietly

"I have lived since the beginning of life itself, you believe I have never fallen in love? And with mortals no less?"

Slowly, Alayla lifted her head, confusion written all over her face

"You... have? But... but what-"

"What do you think happened to them?" he asked gently, stroking his fingers through his sister's short dark locks

"I loved from afar, and they lived their lives, and when we met I greeted them with a smile, and they often greeted me with fear, I did try, in the beginning, a few times. to love mortals, to be with them, but it always ended the same way,"

"Why don't you ever try to pursue them after they've died?"

"Could you imagine a life bogged down by death? Even in the Heavens I imagine it must be quite dreadful, besides, Life and I have an affair of our own that we carry out, even if we're unfaithful to one another, we need each other to survive,"

Alayla looked down, shaking her head slowly

"I don't ... I don't think anyone could have that with me, if Life is your true other half than Irayna is mine and she does not want me anymore, if ... if she ever did,"

"Irayna is frustrated with you, as I'm sure you have been with her, as I have been with Life and as she has been with me, it doesn't mean you won't find your way back to each other, and some day you'll get past whatever is holding the two of you apart now,"

Alayla shifted, choosing not to respond

She wanted to believe him, but she couldn't help the skepticism

"Though I sense it is less Irayna you are worried about, and more this mortal you've fallen for hm?"

"Yes... I love him, and yet... yet I can't-"

"You can't touch him, because he's mortal, and because you don't wish to inflict the mindset of war upon him,"

"Yes," she confirmed, voice barely above a whisper

"I see," Than said quietly, giving her shoulder a squeeze and kissing her head

"I promise you, things will change, things will get better, you just have to wait and see,"

She nodded solemnly, though she found it hard to believe him, and hung her head as her brother left her to herself

This was not the first time she had become frustrated with her "gift", and it would surely not be the last either

But this was the time when she was simply the most upset, the most discouraged, and the most dissatisfied

She had been slowly losing her love of war for a long time now

Perhaps it was because of how common it was getting in the mortal realm, or perhaps Irayna was rubbing off on her, she didn't know, she just knew what she felt

And she no longer felt like the Goddess Of War

With her mind made up, she left for the border world between the mortal realm and the Heavens

There was something there that could help rid her of her plight

The River Of Alita

The River Of Alita was a river that was crafted by the Gods and Goddesses who were suffering in much the same way that Alayla was. overcome by their powers and wishing for mortal life, they washed themselves clean of the celestial magic they were born to in the River Of Altia and emerged mortal, where they could go to earth and live a human life

The practice was deeply frowned upon, and by many considered shameful, as it had quite a negative effect on the world

After all, if a God or Goddess suddenly existed no more then what would become of their power?

Something like love or fertility would destroy the mortal worlds in the time it took for another God or Goddess to be born of the same power

But surely the same could not be said for war

Although Alayla had always believed war to be necessary, she knew within reason that it truly wasn't

It was just an excuse to make her feel less like she was the bringer of harm

When she reached the river she felt somehow.... more distraught than before

The thought of giving up what she had always been, for all of these centuries... it scared her... and she didn't even know that Theodore would reciprocate her feelings

But the thought that he might, the thought that there could be a chance, was enough to propel her forward and she took the first step into the river

The water was warm, soothing, and when she looked down she could only see blood on her hands

The blood of all those who had died at the hands of war...

"Alayla?"

Glancing up, the Goddess was shocked to see Theodore standing across from her

"Theodore...?"

"Alayla what are you doing!?"

"I'm washing away this blood.... getting rid of this... infection... so that I can touch you, so that we can be together," she explained, reaching down to dip her hands into the water

"Alayla stop! Don't do this!"

"Why not!? It's for the betterment of everything! No one needs war, no one wants it, and it does nothing but destroy everything it touches! .. Including me,"

"Alayla please stop,"

Turning around, she was shocked to see Than standing behind her, a look of concern across his face as he stepped closer

"Why? Brother.... this is a good thing, no one needs war, no one wants it," she insisted, watching as the blood washed off of her hands and into the water

It felt good, cleansing... but also as if she was losing a part of herself

A part that she wasn't quite ready to give up

"There is more to war than violence and hatred Alayla, I realize that you don't understand it, but you ARE needed.... more than that, even if it wasn't needed, it is part of who you are, and I do not wish to ever see ANY part of who you are washed away,"

Alayla felt the tears begin again, streaming down her face and falling into the water below her, she didn't know what to do

She was so confused and in pain and she just wanted something... she just wanted....

She wanted touch

And she realized belatedly, as she stared ahead of her again, that that was precisely what she had

Theodore was hugging her, standing in the water and just... hugging her....

"Theodore?"

"It's ok," he promised

"It won't affect me,"

Believing the river had done its job, Alayla began to cry harder, wrapping her arms around Theodore and squeezing with all of her might, aching for more comfort and for the pain to fade away

"As touching as this is, you should both get out of that water before it changes its mind," Than said simply as he took a step away from the river

"What are you talking about?" Alayla asked in confusion

"The river, have you not noticed that it isn't working? The water knows that you aren't sincere about wanting to be rid of your power, Alayla, it's giving you a second chance to keep it,"

The Goddess stared at her brother in confusion before turning back to Theodore

"But... but I don't-"

"I'm not mortal anymore," he explained, reaching up to gently stroke her cheek

On the one hand that made sense, they WERE in the in-between world, no one who entered was entirely mortal, but...

But her power should have still affected him

And that's when realization hit her, that Theodore was there but he wasn't there alone

He had come with her brother

Than, The God Of Death...

"No..." she breathed, putting a hand over her mouth as she turned towards her brother

"How could you do this to him!? You took away his life!"

"Alayla he didn't take me, I went willingly,"

She turned towards the human in shock, mouth falling open and eyebrows pinching in confusion

"But-"

"He explained everything, he offered to bring me here if I wanted to come, asked me to make the choice between you or a mortal life and. ... I chose you, it wasn't a hard decision, I'm an orphan with no wife or children and no real friends, what do I have binding me to that world? Plants? But here.... here I'm open to so many new opportunities, and here... I have you,"

Alayla didn't know what to do, or what to say, what do you say to someone who had just given up everything for you?

So she decided to say nothing, leaning forward and for the first time pressing a kiss against Theodore's lips, hugging him tightly and feeling a tear roll down her cheek

She inhaled shakily, pulling away and hugging him once again, absorbing the amazing, warm sensation of contact as she glanced up at her brother, mouthing a silent "Thank you" to him

Than did nothing but nod, smiling at his sister- his finally happy sister- and nudging for her to leave the water, which, thankfully, she and Theodore finally did

It was watching the two of them together, seeing his sister's happiness, that spurred Than on to begin hunting for his own happiness once again

And he figured the best place to start was probably with his opposite, to find Life

Just as Alayla, the Goddess Of War, had found her peace

The Gold And Silver Seashell

Once upon a time

In an ocean far, far away

There lived a beautiful mermaid named Riley

She was a sweet and gentle soul with glasses made from coral and sea glass and a smile that could bring out the sun on a rainy day

Riley was happy with her life as a mermaid

But she was lonely

Though she had plenty of friends in her pod, she felt like she was missing something

Or perhaps more specifically, like she was missing some ONE...

It was one day in the beginning of summer when she and her pod were traveling to a new part of the sea that she realized what it was that was missing

She had stopped for a break and come up on the surface to float in the warm sun drenched top of the water when she saw him

Looking forward, she saw a man on an island

He was a beautiful man with tan skin and hair as dark as the night sky

And Riley fell instantly in love

She swam up to the island, for this moment away from her pod, and introduced herself at once

The man had smiled at her, as if he was staring at the very sun incarnate when he looked at her, and introduced himself as Gil

"What are you doing on the surface Gil?" Riley asked in confusion

"I'm not a merman I'm afraid," he explained as he sat down in the sand to be closer to her

"Then... if not a merman... what are you? Why would you be out here so far away from the mainland?"

Gil gave her a small smile and closed his eyes

When they opened again they were a bright gold and he shook his head quickly from side to side, shaking a fluffy, auburn mane out with it

"A lion!" Riley breathed in amazement

"I had no idea lion-men existed all the way out here!"

"I'm a traveler, but I was shipwrecked." he explained

Riley smiled brightly and swam backwards a few paces

"I have a solution for that,"

"You can fix ships?" Gil asked in surprise

"No, but I know someone who can,"

"And what should I give you in return for fixing my ship?"

Riley thought for a moment, it wasn't really that she wanted anything from him but it was customary for merfolk to only trade their treasures and services rarely give

Giving freely had caused many problems for merfolk in the past and this was a simple solution to avoid a very troubling problem

"A promise," Riley finally concluded

"A promise?" Gil asked in confusion

"A promise," Riley confirmed

"I want you to promise me that we will meet again, promise me that on the next full moon you will be at this island waiting for me,"

Gil gave her a gentle smile and nodded in approval

"A promise then, and I shall keep that promise with my last breath,"

And with that the deal was sealed

Riley watched as her pod mate fixed Gil's ship and he sailed away not long after

And from that moment she waited

She did not wait restlessly however, she spent her time doing some very important things

Namely, she spent her time searching the oceans and the lands and even the skies for a way for her and Gil to be together

After all, she as a mermaid would never be able to live traveling so much nor in the more dry and dehydrated climates that lions were most accustomed to

And as a lion, Gil simply could not live underwater for he would drown

Somewhere, somehow, she knew- there had to be a solution

And so for the first two weeks of their separation Riley searched and searched

And on that third week- she finally found something

It was a seashell

A gold seashell with silver speckles covering all over it

"What you've found my dear is a very ancient artifact," one of the elders in the pod had said

"The gold and silver seashells... so very few exist in our world, they're wishing shells, you make a wish- any wish- and it will come true, and not in the way a wish would come true deceptively as if you would wish by a Djinni or bargain with a leprechaun, these shells are nothing but pure blessings and magic and will grant any wish your heart desires exactly as it should be wished,"

The news was fantastic and exactly what Riley needed to hear

The last few days of her wait were spent near the island so that she could see the ship pull in the morning of the full moon

And much to her delight, the ship did just that

And by the middle of the day, Gil was waiting for her on the island as well

"I've found something spectacular!" they had both said at once upon seeing the other

And when they opened their palms, they both revealed a gold and silver shell...

After confirming with one of the elders in the pod that they were indeed both genuine shells, Riley and Gil came across quite a dilemma

How exactly should they make this wish?

And who's shell do they use?

"The answer seems simple to me," had commented one of Riley's pod mates

"Use both of your shells, turn Riley into half-lion and turn Gil into half-merman, then no matter it be land or sea, you shall be together."

The young couple thought about this for a moment before breaking into excited smiles

"That sounds like an excellent idea,"

And so without further hesitation, they did just as instructed

Riley wished on her shell to become half-lion

And Gil wished on his shell to become half-merman

And once these wishes were made a brilliant storm came overhead and drenched them in rain as the shells glowed and glimmered, magic

splitting forth from them and winding around in whirlwinds around the couple

And when they next opened their eyes, Riley's eyes had become a stunning gold and Gil had developed scales beginning to twist around his legs

They weren't perfect

And it took quite a lot of getting used to on both their parts

But they were together and happy

And that was the most important thing of all

Well it was, at least until a third member was added to their small family

A son by the beautiful name of Liev

When Liev was born his parents were uncertain of what he would be

A merman?

A lion?

Both?

After all, what sort of effect magical species changes had on the genes wasn't exactly covered by most parents

At first it seemed that Liev was merely a merman, for when he was born, the first thing evident was his tail as he splashed and splished in the water around him

But not a moment later, the beautiful baby boy sneezed and with it came a tiny lion mane of peach-fuzz sprouting around his face, proving that though he was a merman, like his parents he was also part lion

They were strange by most creatures' accounts

You couldn't get an odder combination than merfolk and lions

But they were happy

The three of them were together and happy

And that mattered more than anything else

The Helpful Mermaid

Once upon a time

In an ocean clear and blue

There lived a mermaid named Arielle

Arielle was known across the many seas, lakes and even lands for many things

From her beauty to her wit to her grace

But none was she known more for than her kindness

Now merfolk are a very well populated species- despite what human ignorance may suggest- but without a doubt, Arielle is the most kind of them all

After all, few mermaids would risk their very existence just to make someone smile

It happened many months ago, when the air was still warm and merfolk still found themselves breaching the surface of the waves to catch a ray of sunshine here and there

Arielle was traveling with her pod through the water, occasionally peeking up at the surface of the water and getting a glimpse at the sun

It stung her eyes a bit, not being used to the direct light, but the warmth was pleasantly different from the constant cold of the ocean waters

Arielle loved the water, she understood why some merfolk desired to walk on land but she wasn't one of them, in fact, what she far preferred from the surface world was the sky

It was like an entirely different kind of ocean with air that wasn't as thick and yet somehow more difficult to swim through

It had a sun and a moon and BIRDS- Arielle liked birds

She got so caught up looking at the sky sometimes however, that she lost track of her pod, often zoning out until she heard the familiar call of one of her pod mates trying to grab her attention

"Arielle! Keep up!" came a shout from one of the other mermaids

Without another glance Arielle dove back under water to catch up with her pod, but she longed to see the surface again

It was one day in particular when she was collecting stray shiny things (mostly coins, apparently) to make a necklace for one of her friends, that it happened

She was distracted by the warmth of the surface again and loungingly floated on her back as she strung the coins along a strand of ... something... she wasn't too sure what this material was exactly but it was something, she knew that

Time went by and slowly the sun got brighter and brighter and the pleasant warmth turned into more of a searing heat

Realizing she must have been on the surface longer than she had planned to be, Arielle stuffed the necklace-in-the-making back into her bag and dove back underwater

"Hello?" she called

But the ocean was empty, nothing but water surrounding her

"Hello!?" she called a little louder

But again, there was no answer

"Sofia!?"

Nothing

"Piper!?"

Nothing still

"Tristan!!?"

No response

Her heart sank and she swam back to the surface again, wondering if perhaps they had left her alone for some reason

Swimming back to the surface, she intended to get a better look to see if maybe there was someone she could spot from a distance, when realization hit her

She was amazingly close to the shore

Her pod never swam out this distance

Her pod hadn't LEFT

She had just drifted away, possibly not even heard them calling to her as she was so absorbed in the wonders of the surface

Coming to that realization, of course meant one thing:

She would have to swim back to the deeper ocean to find them

She figured she should get a start on it as soon as possible, after all, the more time passed the further away they would get from each other

But just as she was about to dive down and swim away again, she heard a voice calling out to her

"Are you a mermaid?" she heard, turning around and spying a human girl standing on the shore

She was young, not tiny but certainly young, and she was staring at Arielle with such wonder in her eyes that it made the mermaid feel almost... magical

Well more magical than she usually did, obviously

"Yes," she said after a moment of consideration, swimming closer

"I'm a mermaid."

The girl's face stretched into a smile and she almost jumped in excitement

"A mermaid... I've met a mermaid!" she cried

Usually Arielle would smile, wave and head back under the water

After all, merfolk weren't supposed to be exposing themselves to the humans like this to begin with, much less stick around for autographs

But then the girl said something, something that truly struck a nerve with Arielle

"Can I have a picture?"

She should have said no

Right then and there, she should have said no and swum away

But she didn't, instead she stayed there, frozen in the water and staring at her in surprise- no one had ever asked her that before after all...

"I.."

"Please can... can I have a picture? My little sister loves mermaids so much, I don't get to see her much anymore, it would mean the world to her if she saw a real, live mermaid but... she doesn't live here, if I could show her that I met one then maybe she won't stop believing in magic, she's getting older, she will soon... please?"

Arielle knew how badly this could go, she remembered the tales from her childhood of fishermen and evil humans with nets and spears who came to exterminate merfolk

She knew there would be consequences if anyone found out, and yet... she couldn't stand to say no

"Sure," she relented after a moment of hesitation

The girl instructed her on what to do, where to go, how to pose and she realized how easily this could be a trap

But still she couldn't bring herself to say no

And so she did as the human asked and allowed her to snap some pictures

She didn't ask anything further, nor did the human, and when the human left, Arielle in all her good-heartedness, had no second thoughts about letting her take away pictures proving the existence of merfolk

Besides, she had bigger fish to catch, she had to get back to her pod after all

Luckily the swim wasn't as long as she thought it would be and she was able to get back before dark

"Arielle! Have you spent all this time at the surface?" one of the mermaids asked worriedly

"Oh... yes, I was making this for you," she replied with a smile, pulling the necklace- now complete after taking a few breaks to rest her tail had resulted in her finishing it- from her bag and handing it to her pod mate

"You're going to get hurt one of these days if you keep that up, or worse a human will see you," she warned

Arielle smiled gently, following her pod mate towards the rest of her clan

"Oh, I'm not so worried,"

The Inspirational Turkey

Once upon a time

In a forest full of animals

There lived a turkey named Simon

Simon was a rather exceptional turkey

Not for any special talents or skills

And not for being some sort of storybook hero or having done anything especially magnificent

But for the fact that Simon was kind to everyone, even the people who were cruel to him

Simon lived in a rafter of other turkeys out in a very nice field in the woods

It was a fenced in area with an old, broken down, human-built house behind it and they found that it was a rather nice little fortress, sometimes when it rained or got cold they even went in the little house and made themselves at home

Simon was happy with the rest of his rafter, they were all very nice to each other and cared about each other a great deal

And it's because they cared for each other a great deal that Simon offered to go on the most frightening journey of his life

For you see, one summer one of the other turkeys came down with a cold- a turkey cold, not a cold turkey mind you- and the only thing that would make her feel better was a sprig of Rapunzel flower

But Rapunzel flower didn't grow naturally in these woods, the nearest place it grew was in a human garden far, far away

And it's no secret that humans are awfully mean to turkeys, the turkeys aren't sure what they had ever done to insight such wrath but they sure were sorry for whatever it was

That aside, Simon offered to go and get the Rapunzel flower for his friend, he felt confident that he could get the flower with little fuss

And so he was off, traveling just past the fence was no problem, it was once he came to the base of the forest that things started getting a little sketchy

Despite it being a warm summer, Simon felt unusually cold in the forest and he ruffled his feathers a little as he walked, something didn't feel right here but he wasn't quite sure what it was

"Who goes there?"

Simon looked up, searching for the voice from the trees

"Who are you?"

He turned around, for that had been another voice

"Who do you think you are?"

Simon turned around in circles a little bit, searching for the voices

And then the questions started repeating themselves, louder and faster from all around him

"Who goes there?"

"Who are you?"

"Who do you think you are?"

Simon was spinning around so fast trying to keep up with the voices that he fell down on his behind and could only flail around in an attempt to get up (sometimes having wings was considerably less helpful than people realized)

Suddenly a loud, chortling, laughter emerged from around him and when Simon looked up again he saw a small parliament of owls- four or five of them he'd say- sitting in the trees above him

"Oh what happened silly turkey? Did you get dizzy?" one of the owls laughed

"Um, well, a little bit," Simon confessed, finally climbing to his feet and ruffling his feathers again to brush himself off

"Were we too confusing for you?" one of the others snickered

"You never did answer our questions," piped the third owl

"Were we talking too fast?" came the voice of the fourth

Simon shrank in on himself a little, swallowing and looking down

"Well... well yes you were a little bit," he answered

The owls started laughing once again, the first one speaking up once more and tilting his head from side to side in clear amusement

"Ho ho ho, of course we were, we shouldn't have expected a TURKEY to keep up with us," the owl taunted

"What... what is that supposed to mean?" Simon asked quietly

"What is that supposed to mean it asks," snickered one of the other owls

"I... what.... what's so funny? Why are you all laughing at me?" Simon asked as he backed away slowly from the gaggle in front of him

"Why, you are dear," commented one of the other owls

"I don't ... I don't see why I'm funny," Simon said quietly

"Of course you don't, turkeys never do,"

"What do you mean? There are plenty of turkeys out there who are funnier than I am, I don't know why you're laughing at me," he said quietly

"My my, you really ARE quite dense aren't you dear?" the first owl tutted

"And without even any looks to back it up," the owl next to him said with a shake of his head

The first owl nodded in what appeared to be some sort of sympathy and and Simon sniffled slightly

"What do you mean I'm dense? I... I'd like to think I'm pretty lightweight," he said innocently

This sent the owls into bouts full of laughter, so loud and obnoxious that it spooked Simon into backing up into a tree, which caused him to scream out in terror and flail around- only worsening the laughter of the owls

"Let me explain myself in words even you can understand," the first owl said as he flew down from his perch and landed in front of Simon

"We're laughing at you because we're smarter than you are dear and even for a turkey, you really are quite stupid," the owl explained

Simon's beak trembled and he sniffled again, wiping a wing across his eyes

"That... that isn't true," he said meekly

"Isn't it? Tell me, which one of us do the humans fear and which one do they feast upon? The humans look at us as omens of wisdom, greatness and even death, the humans look at you as a joke or, well, dinner," he snickered

Simon flinched backwards, feeling the tears starting to sting his eyes as he ran as far away from the forest as quickly as he could

He could still hear the owls laughing at him in the distance and it only made him cry harder

No one had ever been so mean to him before

Yes, he knew turkeys were thought to be exceptionally unintelligent, the other animals made sure they knew that but he had never been under such cruel direct attacks before, and it made him feel every bit as stupid as they accused him of being

Simon was so distressed in fact, that he didn't even bother watching where he was going and ran right into a massive wall

An unusually warm wall

When he blinked and looked up, he found that it wasn't a wall at all

What he had run into was a BEAR

A very, very big bear- even by bear standards- who stood tall enough to easily be taller than four turkeys stacked together

"Hmmm?" the bear grunted as he looked down at Simon

"Please don't eat me!" Simon cried, shielding his face with his wing

"Please, please! I have to get medicine for my friend! I know you think turkeys are nothing but brainless pieces of meat but we... we're not! Even if we are stupid... we... we feel just like everyone else! Please let me help my friend!" he sputtered out quickly

The bear stared at him and slowly sat down in front of Simon, tilting his head to the side

"Why do you think I would eat you? I don't eat birds- especially not turkeys," he said in a deep low rumble

"You... you don't?" he breathed

The bear shook his head, yawning slightly

"I eat berries and fish mostly, sometimes other things but I don't eat turkeys,"

"O-Oh... oh.... th-thank you," Simon said

The bear smiled softly, reaching over with his gigantic paw and with the gentleness of a rabbit, patted Simon on the head

"Friend," the bear assured him slowly, putting his paw back down

"O-Oh... well... thank you, you're my friend too," Simon smiled, feeling just a tiny bit better than he did earlier

"Tell me new friend, why did you say turkeys are stupid? Turkeys aren't stupid," he said simply

"You seem to be the only one to think so... I'm Simon, what's your name?"

"Trevor," the bear smiled back

"It's nice to meet you Trevor,"

"It's nice to meet you too Simon, what do you mean I'd be the first one to think turkeys aren't stupid?" he asked with confusion and concern

"Well... you would be, everyone thinks we're stupid, the entire forest does, I think my friends are smart but... but I'm not,"

Trevor stared at Simon, looking a little heartbroken as he reached out and nudged Simon closer to him

"That's why you were crying?" he asked gently

Simon nodded slowly and Trevor leaned down licking the tears away from Simon's cheeks- although really, Trevor ended up just licking his entire head in one slurp-

"People think I'm stupid too, I'm sorry someone hurt your feelings," Trevor said sincerely

"What? Why do people think YOU'RE stupid? Bears are smart," Simon said with confusion

"Not me, I'm too big and quiet, people call me stupid because I don't always know how to navigate my big body, sometimes I run into things

or fall down, sometimes I make friends with other animals that I'm not supposed to be friends with, they think I'm stupid," he explained

Simon's heart broke at that, to think that people were saying such mean things about such a sweet person as Trevor, it made his blood boil a little bit and he jumped onto Trevor's leg to get closer to him

"Trevor, you don't listen to a word they say," Simon said firmly

"I don't care how big you are, or that you're too nice and friendly for your own good, you're a good person and you're VERY smart!"

Trevor shook his head again, leaning down and nudging Simon affectionately

"I'm not smart but thank you for trying, you're a nice friend Simon and you're much smarter, you got here all on your own and I bet you didn't run into anything or make friends with something that bit you,"

"You... made friends with something that bit you?" Simon asked in confusion

Trevor nodded, cradling his paw to his chest

"A couple of times... snakes can be kind of mean..."

Simon cringed, even he new snakes weren't to be trifled with

"Oh Trevor..." he said softly

"You said you wanted to get medicine for your friend right? I'll get you through the forest so nobody will attack you and the humans won't attack you if you're with me either, they'll probably just attack me instead," he said with a kind smile, as if that was some kind of grand compromise

"Trevor-" Simon started

But Trevor had already stood up and started meandering through the woods and Simon sort of understood what he had meant

The woods were thick and narrow from all of the trees and plants and Trevor's body was massive and hard to move between it all without getting stuck or knocking something over

He wanted to stop Trevor but he needed to get the Rapunzel flower for his friend

So Simon followed after, running along the clear trail that his new friend was laying out for him

They made it in record time to the human garden where the Rapunzel flower grew and Simon was able to pick the flower without any difficulty

"Human!" Trevor gasped suddenly as Simon was waddling out of the garden

Before Simon could even look over his shoulder, Trevor had stomped towards him and jumped up front, standing in front of the turkey protectively

The human at the front of the house was holding some tiny thing and muttering in human language to its offspring, they heard a clicking noise a few times and a strange beeping sound, but that was all

"I think they just wanted to look at us better Trevor, it's OK," Simon said with a small smile, nudging his friend on the leg

Trevor nodded, urging Simon to go ahead of him just in case

Simon didn't like that Trevor was so willing to put himself in harm's way for him but he knew there was no point arguing with him, so he picked up the Rapunzel flower and headed back into the woods

Simon had intended to take Trevor back to the little fenced area where the rest of his rafter was but half-way through the forest, the owls had started playing their games again

"Who goes there?"

"Who are you?"

"Who do you think you are?"

Trevor took a protective step over Simon, letting out a low growl as he looked around for signs of danger

"Trevor, Trevor it's OK, it's OK they're just owls,"

The bear looked down underneath him at the turkey and frowned

"They're the ones who made you cry?" he asked

Simon blinked, a little surprised that he had remembered that

"Well... yes-"

Trevor suddenly let out a loud, ear-wrecking roar, shaking the entire forest around them

Simon felt sure that the only reason it didn't cause him to roll away was due to being safe in the space between Trevor's belly and the ground

The owls however, were not so lucky

"Oh my head, my head... what just happened?" one of them asked as he tried to upright himself on the ground

Trevor stalked forward, looming over the owls and easily catching their attention

"You hurt my friend's feelings," he accused lowly

"Oh look another Einstein," one of the owls snickered

"Yes well, it's his own fault, he should have a tougher skin than that," offered another

"According to the humans their skin IS pretty tough," cackled one of the other owls

Simon knew what that meant but Trevor seemed a bit confused so he decided for his friend's sake not to say anything

"Look, why don't you just run along and go fall down a waterfall or something, we have no time for your half-witted games here," said the first owl again

Trevor stood up tall, bowing his chest out and letting out another roar that knocked all of the owls clean off their feet and onto their backs

"Stop saying mean things to my friend, apologize!" Trevor demanded

"OK, we're sorry that turkeys are so feather-brained," laughed one of the owls

Trevor inhaled, snapping his teeth at the owl

"Bears don't eat owls but I'm willing to make an exception," he snarled

The owl gulped and looked over at Simon, then back at Trevor, who seemed to be growing angrier and angrier by the second

"Fine... we're sorry for stating the truth,"

"You're sorry for telling LIES!" Trevor bellowed

The owls scrambled, huddling together as they pushed the first owl forward

"Alright! Alright we're sorry for telling lies! Now would you PLEASE tell your guard-bear to move along!?"

"I don't know, according to you I'm too stupid to know how to do that," Simon commented with a smirk

The owls glared but finally relented

"We're sorry, we won't ever insult turkeys again, we promise," the first owl huffed

"Good," Simon smirked, heading to Trevor's side and nudging his leg

"Are your feelings still hurt Simon?" Trevor asked quietly

Simon smiled gently, shaking his head

"No, thanks to you they don't hurt anymore," he said honestly

Trevor smiled gently at him, snorting at the owls before walking forward, his huge body slamming into a tree on his way through the woods, and Simon could hear the owls scream and shout a loud "SNAKE! SNAKE!" as they likely scrambled to get back into their own tree

Snakes were usually found on the ground- heck, owls usually won when it came to a fight between them and snakes

....

TREE snakes on the other hand were a little bigger and less easy to fight off...

"You knew a snake was hiding up in that tree didn't you?" Simon smirked as Trevor guided him home

"Maybe," the bear said shyly

"See Trevor? You are smart," the turkey smiled back

And the rest of Simon's rafter happened to agree with him, they all thought Trevor was VERY smart

But much more importantly than that, they thought Trevor was very KIND

And because the turkeys liked him so much and he liked them so much back, Trevor decided to stay in the little clearing the turkeys had made for themselves, standing guard to keep bad people away and enjoying the company of other people who were kind like he was and didn't mind that he was big and bulky

It worked out perfectly for everyone it seemed

Even the humans who put a video of a bear defending a turkey up on the Internet and became minor celebrities for it

The Journey Of Akakios And Medusa

Once upon a time

There lived a woman named Medusa

We all know the legend of Medusa

The story of a woman punished for a crime that she did not commit

The story of a woman who's beauty was stolen and replaced with monstrosity

The story of a woman who became persecuted for her hideous nature, for her terrible power

Medusa, once an innocent beauty, was cursed by Athena to become horrifyingly hideous

She was cursed to have snakes for hair and for her gaze to turn to stone anyone who looked at her

But what you probably have never heard of is the story of Akakios

Akakios too was accused of a crime he did not commit, but rather than being punished by the Gods, he was punished by the King

And rather than his eyes being cursed to turn people to stone, his eyes were taken away from him completely

Akakios had once had a bright future

He was clever and bright and came from a political family

He could have- at one time- married nearly anyone he wanted and had a family of his own

But the moment his eyes were taken from him, so too was that future

Akakios became little more than a burden in his city and one day he set out to travel on his own, to find a new place to stay, one where he wouldn't be so much trouble

It was on his travels that he happened upon a cave, and, looking for shelter from the rain, he stepped inside it

Little did he know that the cave was already inhabited by another outcast of society

"Whoever you are, leave at once!" boomed a strong female voice from the depths of the cave

Akakios jumped, startled, but not frightened, he knew better than to be frightened and he figured he had lived through worse than whatever this woman could do to him

He wasn't afraid of death, and besides death, there wasn't too much else he felt a human could do to him that was worse than cutting out his eyes

"I do not fear you," Akakios said clearly and calmly

"You should! I am Medusa, have you not heard of me!?"

At this time, Medusa had only been turned into a monster for a matter of months, and Akakios had been without his eyes for well past a single month, word hadn't gotten to his city by the time he left

"I have not," he replied honestly

This seemed to greatly shock Medusa, given that she fell quiet for a long moment

The sound of footsteps fell against the cold cave floor and Akakios could feel a presence right in front of him

It was horrifying, not being able to know who was there

But somehow at the same time he wasn't afraid

"Remove your blindfold and look upon my face," Medusa sneered

"I cannot,"

"And why can you not remove your blindfold?"

"I can remove my blindfold," Akakios adjusted, "I just cannot look upon your face, I cannot look upon anything anymore, my eyes are no longer in my possession,"

Once more, Medusa fell silent

In the quiet of the moment, with only still breaths to be heard in the cave, Akakios could hear the hissing of snakes, but even these seemed to calm with only little prompting

"You are blind?" Medusa finally asked

"Quite, I would show you, but I wouldn't want to frighten you, and I've been told that what's become of my face is quite frightening,"

There was a sound in front of him, like dirt being moved around and the shift of weight

"I understand, my eyes are ... not worth looking into,"

"I'm sure that isn't true, the eyes are the windows to the soul, all eyes are worth seeing," Akakios assured her with a soft smile

"If that's truly the case, then my soul must be truly hideous, for my eyes are ... terrifying, they are the eyes of a demon,"

Akakios was quiet for a moment before reaching out, hearing the roar of snake hissing getting louder as his hand moved and he held it in the air, reluctant to set it down in case the snakes were on the ground before him

"Is it not possible that those eyes are not your own? That they were cursed upon you- as mine were cursed to be taken?"

When Medusa didn't respond, Akakios presumed that he was correct

"Then it doesn't matter, a curse shrouds a soul, it does not become it,"

For the longest time, Medusa was entirely quiet, even the hissing of the snakes was gone, but Akakios could still hear the intake of her breath

"Why are you here?" she finally asked

"Because I'm blind and disgraced, my city doesn't want me so I don't want it either, I'm looking for a place that DOES want me,"

"And if I were to want you? If I were to want you here, with me, in this cave all alone? Would you really throw away your life for a stranger in a cave all alone?"

"You imply that there's something better waiting for me," he said with a slight laugh, gently taking Medusa's hand and setting it on his face, over his blindfold

"Can you feel this? The emptiness? Those are my prospects,"

They never did actually agree upon anything

There was no grand announcement between them that Akakios would stay

It just happened

Medusa was not blind

She could see just as well as anyone

The curse only came in when she looked into someone else's eyes

As such, Medusa was able to help Akakios in ways that no one else could, or probably was willing to

She taught him to see without seeing

To sense the vibrations in the land and feel even the slightest changes in the wind

To hear things that were silent before and find different scents with every inhale

It helped him do many things such as garden and hunt and collect water

However, there was still one thing that Akakios was incapable of doing, and it had nothing to do with his blindness

Word had begun traveling about Medusa and her awe-inspiring power

The warriors had started out in small, manageable numbers that Medusa could scare away or even turn to stone

But as time passed they started coming in more and more, faster and faster, and she could no longer keep up on her own

Even with Akakios helping as little as he could, he wasn't combat trained, and much less was he trained to take on small armies

They knew that in order to stay alive, they would have to run far, far away, far enough that the stories couldn't follow them

And so they set out on a journey, a man who could not see, and a woman who could not be seen, searching for a place so far away that the stories of Medusa's powers could not have possibly traveled there

Many wondered how they could make such a journey

It would be nearly impossible even for two average people to travel so far on foot

And truthfully, no one knows where they went, or how they got there

The story of Medusa- the popular one, the legend- always goes that Perseus slays her and takes her head

But there are mentions worlds and worlds away, in lands that speak different languages and cultures that had never heard of the Goddess Athena, who spoke in hushes of a couple who both wore blindfolds over their eyes

The murmurs mention that the woman always had her hair wrapped in a turban, and that though they both kept their eyes wrapped, she seemed to guide the man she was with

The stories never say where they go or what they do, they're only mentions, like ghosts in the wind

And although many believe that Perseus indeed took Medusa's head

And although very few have ever even heard of a blind man named Akakios

There are some out there who believe the ancient whisperings they heard

They believe in the couple, in the love between them, in the great escape that defied history itself

And if you ask around for the right people at the right time, you may just hear a story

A story of an island far far away, with a name no one has heard for sure, said to be ruled by a blind king, and a queen who always has her hair wrapped in cloth

The Kind Dragon

Once upon a time

In a land full of happiness and light

There lived a dragon named Amber

Amber was a very special dragon, for she was kinder than any other

It wasn't that other dragons weren't kind- they were, in fact dragons were some of the kindest creatures in all the worlds

But Amber was especially special, as she was kinder than any in the entire realm

Her favorite part of the day was always right after stretching her wings in the morning, when she settled into the nearest tree top and napped underneath the warm rays of the sun

The birds especially liked this time of day, for they enjoyed curling up beneath her wings or resting atop her head to take a rest as well

It was on one particular day however, that something changed in her plan

She was resting in the tree, preparing to doze off for her afternoon nap when suddenly, a frantic fluttering caught her ear

"Amber! Amber!" cried a little sparrow as he flew toward her

"Someone needs your help!"

The dragon sat up abruptly, turning to face the bird full-on in concern

"What's wrong? What's happening?" she asked worriedly

"There's a dog stuck in a fence nearby, no one can get her leg out! "the bird cried

"I'll see if I can help," Amber suggested, standing on the tree limb and flapping her huge, majestic wings as she lifted into the sky and took flight towards the designated location, the little sparrow leading her on along the way

They flew for several minutes until the dragon spotted a large chain fence down below them, separating the forest from the road that the humans had built nearby

Surely enough, there was a little dog- a Boston Terrier it looked like- with her hind leg caught between the wire, whimpering and crying out for help

Without wasting a single second, Amber flew down to the ground and in a beautiful puff of smoke, transformed herself into her human form

"My goodness, don't worry, everything will be OK," she said gently as she sprinted towards the fence, kneeling down carefully in front of it and reaching out towards the dog

The pup only whimpered loudly, shaking frightfully as Amber reached out

Her heart broke for the little dog and she put on a smile, hoping to comfort her

"Don't worry little one, I'm here to help, my name is Amber. What's your name?" she asked politely

The dog stared up at her for a moment before speaking quietly

"Lily," she said softly

"And such a pretty name too. Don't worry Lily, I'll help you," the dragon insisted

But when she placed her fingers near the wire that was holding Lily's foot back, the little dog only yelped and yowled in agony, the wire tight and tangled around her foot

Drawing her hands back quickly, Amber tried to think of the best way to alleviate the situation, snapping her fingers with sudden realization, she swooshed her hand and watched as it turned into a dragon's paw, full of glistening scales and sporting long, sharp claws

She then took a deep breath and exhaled a deep orange flame onto her claws, the fire dissipated quickly but it left the hard bone of the claws absolutely searing

"Hold still for me now Lily," she said gently, running her claw in a smooth pattern over the chain and watching it fall to pieces under her touch

The chains came apart alright, releasing Lily's foot from the fence, but there were still several links tied around her paw

"Don't worry, I've still got you," Amber said soothingly, transforming her clawed hand back into a normal looking, human hand and reaching out to start gently pulling each link from where it was around Lily's paw

It wasn't possible when it was all connected to the fence, but now that it was separated and Lily was standing on even ground it wasn't difficult at all to untangle the pieces bit by bit

"Thank you, thank you so much!" Lily cried in delight as she spun around on her no-longer-tied-up feet and jumped up, giving Amber an appreciative lick to the cheek

The dragon laughed joyfully and smiled brightly at her

"Oh don't mention it! I'm just glad that you're feeling better," she replied happily

She was about to rise and go back to her tree, when the same little sparrow from before came for her again

"Amber there's more trouble!" shouted the bird

"What is it now?" Amber asked worriedly

"There's a witch who's had a broom accident and she's going to be late for her mid-term, do you think you could help her?"

Amber rose to her feet, giving a confident smile and allowing smoke to pour in around her as she transformed back into her dragon form

"Of course I can," she replied, after all it would be no problem to transport someone from one place to another in this form, she did it all the time

She once again allowed the sparrow to show her where to go and flew through the skies, gliding on air as she spotted a pileup of brooms on the ground below

Deciding that must be the location she needed to be at, she dove straight down and landed beside them, catching the attention of a very worried looking witch

"I don't know what happened, I was driving and then all of a sudden there was some sort of plane and myself and six other broom riders were all ... here, our brooms destroyed,"

"Don't worry Miss Witch," Amber said with a positive smile

"I'm sure that you'll be able to get your broom fixed soon, but for now I believe you're late for something aren't you? Let's get you to your class,"

"Really? But... you don't even know me, why would you help me?" the witch asked in confusion

"Because it's the right thing to do," Amber replied simply

Because sometimes, it really was that simple

Smiling in relief, the witch moved closer and climbed onto the dragon's back, carefully grasping a hold of her shoulders as Amber rose into the sky again, rising above the clouds and well above any potential planes that could be coming her way

"This is my first mid-term ever, I'm so terrified I'll be late." the witch said anxiously

"Don't be, I'll help you, I promise," Amber amended, spotting the school down below, she dove for it again and landed, of all places, on the roof

The witch smiled as she got down, thanking her profusely and fetching her wand from her pocket

"I can take it from here, thank you again so much!" she cried, running to the side of the building and waving her wand as she jumped down, landing on the huge bouncy castle that had just appeared out of nowhere

Amber watched with a cringe and shivered as she shrank back

"Even I wouldn't do that..." she muttered to herself

After all, just because she could fly it didn't mean she didn't have a healthy caution about jumping from high places...

"Amber, Amber!" the sparrow cried again as he approached her

"What's wrong?" the dragon asked

"There's another problem, there's a werewolf in distress!"

"Well what's wrong with him?"

"He won't say, but he looks awfully upset, this is MY werewolf, won't you please help?" the bird asked

"Of course I will," Amber smiled back, taking to the sky one more time as she followed the bird

This time she ended up in a park of some sort, near a large gathering of trees

"Mr. Werewolf, what's wrong?" Amber asked as she landed before the poor distressed looking creature

"Amber I need help," he said urgently, pulling her closer and whispering to her

"I dropped my engagement ring in the river, I was going to propose here to my boyfriend on Christmas Eve and now it's gone, what do I do?" he cried anxiously

Amber glanced up at the bird, who was sitting in the tree and staring at them in concern, before smiling brightly

"Leave that to me, just stay here and make sure our friend doesn't have a heart attack," she teased with a wink, transforming again into her human form- all except for her eyes, those stayed a bright, shimmering gold as she ran towards the river and stared into the water

Dragons had a natural talent for spotting shiny things, and something like a ring? That would be no problem

She lifted herself onto the tips of her toes, looking high and looking low, and smiling brightly when she saw the ring a few feet away, crammed underneath a few rocks in the water

Rushing down the river, she rolled her sleeves up and kicked off her shoes before wading in, reaching down and producing the ring without a moment of problem

"Here you go," she said with a smile as she raced back towards the werewolf and deposited the beautiful gold band in his hand

"Thank you, thank you! How can I ever repay you?" he breathed in relief as he clutched the ring close

"Just don't forget to invite me to the wedding," she replied with a good-natured wink, blowing them a kiss before allowing herself to take on her dragon form again and fly back to the forest that she had come from

As she settled back into the tree, letting her bird friends gather around her and nest or perch themselves all over and around her massive dragon body, she laid her head on her paws and began drifting off to sleep, hoping to catch that nap she wanted before trouble arose again

Not that she would mind of course, Amber would always help when needed and always do so without a word of complaint, for Amber was the kindest dragon in all the land

The Laughing Banshee

Once upon a time

In a land high in the hills

There lived a banshee named Eleanor

Eleanor was a very good banshee who served her family- the O'Malley family- well

She was always perfectly timed with her screams and wails and her laments were some of the most beautiful in all the land

However such talent came with a price

Being a good banshee meant knowing when someone in the family you watch over is going to die and predicting it well

And doing that meant a lot of tears, a lot of sadness, a lot of heartache

And so, despite how talented she was, how wonderful of a banshee she was, Eleanor was always sad and always found herself sobbing horribly

There was no joy in her life, everything was death and misery it seemed

There was one week in particular that was especially heartbreaking for her when she lost three members of the family at once to an accident

She wailed and wailed and screamed and screamed until she thought that this must surely be too much even for a banshee

She sniffled and sobbed, scruffing the bloody clothes of the deceased against her washboard and crying her tears into the wash bucket

She was so tired and strung out from this, she just wanted a break

A break from being a banshee

"Excuse me, what are you doing?"

Turning her head, Eleanor sniffled and wiped her eyes again, staring out at one of the family members, a teenage boy around the age of eighteen with unruly copper hair and gentle chocolate eyes and skin as pale as clouds

Seeing him, knowing that one day she would be singing a lament for him too, only made Eleanor cry harder as she found herself collapsing against her wash bucket, dissolving into a mess of tears an feeling all of the stress and pressure of the events weighing on her

She heard him take a step forward and she hung her head, she didn't know what would come next, sympathy maybe, she got that every once in a blue moon but it was rare

For the most part humans didn't interact with banshees at all

"Here," she heard, looking up and wiping her eyes

The boy was standing over her, holding out some sort of chocolaty treat

"My mama made brownies, I smuggled one from her when she wasn't looking but you're welcome to have it if you'd like it, they're good and chocolate makes everything better,"

Eleanor stared at him in confusion wiping her eyes again

"But... banshees don't need to eat anything,"

"Ohhh that must be why you banshees always look so skinny! You're so thin you're practically ghosts of who you were!" he said with a bright smile

The joke took a moment for her to catch onto and already the boy was starting to apologize for his humor being in poor taste, but as soon as she got it, Eleanor... Eleanor started to laugh

She laughed loudly, happily, wiping away tears of humor from her eyes and rolling onto the ground

That was probably the funniest thing she had ever heard

She sniffed a few more times before she finally calmed down, unable to stop giggling here and there and much to her relief the boy sat down beside her, still handing her the brownie

"Well, OK it's been established that you don't HAVE to eat, but do you WANT to eat? I mean... can you? Surely you can still taste it," he reasoned

Smiling and nodding, Eleanor accepted half of the brownie and started to chew on it

"I'm Eleanor," she introduced

"Colin O'Malley, it's nice to meet you there Miss Eleanor,"

"Please um... don't call me 'Miss' it makes me feel old,"

That time Colin was the one to laugh and Eleanor couldn't help but smile at him

He was right, chocolate did make everything better

And from then on Eleanor and Colin were the best of friends

For three years they were nearly inseparable and the O'Malleys were more than just a little concerned that their son was spending so much time with a spirit but Colin didn't seem to care, he enjoyed Eleanor's company and that was all that mattered

And Eleanor enjoyed Colin's company more than anything else in the entire world, far better than anyone's company she had enjoyed before

Because Colin... he made her laugh

She hadn't laughed in so long... and here Colin was making her giggle like a teenager

It was the most amazing, surreal thing

And it was frequent too

He made sure that whenever a family member died, instead of grieving with the rest of his family, he came to check on Eleanor to make sure she was doing alright

"Shouldn't you be mourning at the funeral with the others?" she would reason as she sobbed by the hillside

"I barely knew 'em anyway, you're far more upset than half the people at the funeral and... you're all alone, you don't have anyone else to mourn with you,"

That had been the first time in her entire life that Eleanor's feelings of grief were ever taken into account and it was amazing

Really and truly amazing

To feel so validated like this... it was like nothing else she could describe

Yes, Eleanor adored Colin's company

But then, one day Eleanor woke up startled and when she inhaled she immediately felt the familiar chill of death in the air

Knowing what came next she began to sob quietly, getting out of bed and heading toward the window where she could clearly see the O'Malley castle and grounds

She closed her eyes, leaning forward and waiting for a name to strike her

And when it did she really, truly, didn't want to scream

She held her hands over her mouth, swallowed her tears and tried her very, VERY hardest not to let out a single peep.... but it came

Just like it always did for she had no control over it, the scream came and she found herself screaming out for the name "Colin"

And when the screaming was finished she sobbed harder than she ever had before

She cried so loudly and so harshly, that even other banshees had started to cover their ears

When she found the blood-soaked clothes that confirmed his impending death she screamed again- not out of warning but out of her own agony and suffering and instead of washing them in the wash bin like she was supposed to, she instead clung to them against her chest and sobbed and sobbed until they were clean

The clothes smelled like him and they were as soft and warm as he was

The shirt was the softest blue, like the ocean you could see by looking down over the cliff, and it was softer than a baby's blanket and Eleanor never wanted to let go of it

"Boo!", she heard, turning around and seeing Colin standing in front of her, smiling as if nothing were wrong

"How was my first official joke as a ghost? Pretty great huh? Ah 'boo'... that one's a classic" he grinned

"Colin?" she breathed quietly

"... Um.... Eleanor?"

"Colin it's really you! I thought I'd lost you!" she cried, flinging her arms around his neck and realizing immediately that for the first time she didn't feel that familiar human warmth radiating off of him

She jumped back, staring up at him in shock and horror

"I told you El, I'm a ghost, oh... is that my shirt? Wow, where's the wash bin?" he asked, reaching out for the shirt

"Forget about the shirt,"

"But I LIKE tha-"

"Forget about the shirt! You're a ghost!"

"Yes, as I've been trying to affirm for you for longer than I'd like to admit..."

"But... why?", she asked quietly, rubbing her eyes again

"Oh, because I fell ill, it's no problem, something going around," he shrugged back

"It isn't NO PROBLEM, it's a big problem, you're dead!" Eleanor shouted

"Well I guess that's one way to look at it..." Colin muttered

"Well what way would YOU look at it then?"

"I look at it as.... I've fallen in love with you Eleanor, and now we can spend eternity together now," he answered

Eleanor stared at him in shock before giving him a gentle smile, stepping closer and laying a hand on her shoulder

"There's nothing to worry about" he smiled softly, giving her a short, chaste kiss before leaning back and reaching into his pocket

"Chocolate?"

And for another, yet definitely not the last time, Colin made Eleanor laugh when she was supposed to be crying

The Little Lonely Seal Girl

Once upon a time

In a land dark and dreary

There was a girl by the name of Emi

Emi went through phases

Sometimes they were happy phases and other times they were sad phases, mad phases, phases where she felt like her very mind was suffering a terrible death

But they were always phases and she always drifted in and out of them the way the tide drifted in and out of the shore

Because change is an inevitable thing

Sometimes we have choices in change and sometimes we don't

But no matter if we choose it or not, it will eventually come to us

The good thing about choosing it, is that at least it doesn't take you by surprise

Emi always hated changes though

Ever since the very first change, when she was six-years-old and her mother went to join the angels in Heaven

But Emi, just like everyone else, could not escape the changes and they came to her whether she wanted them to or not

When the changes or the phases became too much for her fragile heart to carry, she often went to the seaside to admire the push and pull of the tide

And she would sit in the sand and think to herself

"The tide changes so very often, if it can still survive, so too can I."

And this is how Emi kept her strength to keep going

But that strength has always been a fleeting thing that she's held onto with all her might

And when the source of that strength underwent a change too, it was the thing that finally broke her down

She was searching for the tide one day, after learning that the bookstore she worked at was closing, when she came upon a very unusual sight

There was a group of people on the shore playing music and dancing

Now this was not terribly unusual if she were to come to one of the more public parts of the beach but this special section, this tiny pocket of land had always been her's

It was a secret spot that was far too much trouble to get to involving caves and tunnels and swimming, but she always found it was worth it

It was small and it was quiet and it was alone and those were all things that Emi needed when she felt bad enough to admire the tide

Now however, that too had changed, for there were no less than twelve people- possibly more- on this very slab of beach

And it caused the brewing storm inside of Emi to pick up from a thunderous thing to a full on hurricane

And teardrops fell like raindrops from her eyes, dripping down her cheeks and streaking them like paint

And the dancers and musicians soon noticed the interruption and the festivities stopped

Many of them simply stared at her with confusion and worry but one girl in particular, a girl with sun-kissed tanned skin and dark brown curls that wound like ocean waves around her face, stepped forward

"You shouldn't be here," Emi finally managed to say, the tears pouring now as she turned and sprinted in the nearest direction- towards the caves- and wiped at her eyes

She was completely unaware that the tanned girl was following her and so when she reached the first cave she collapsed in it, screaming and sobbing in agony as she held herself and tried to calm the raging storm in her heart

"Hello? Hello Miss?" the tanned girl called out to her as she too entered the cave

"Go away! You're not welcome here!" Emi shouted back

She knew it was a cruel thing to say, but her heart was in so much agony that it had simply forgotten to care for others

The tanned girl found her and came to sit down in front of her, smoothing out the pleats in her flowing white dress

"Is this your beach? We're so sorry, we aren't from around here, we're only passing through," she tried to reason

Emi wiped her eyes again, sniffling horribly and shaking her head

"It isn't my beach it's just... this is my SPOT.. this is the spot I always come to when I need something.... something stable and unchanging, I'm always alone here, I can always think.... but now even this is changing..."

The other girl frowned deeply, reaching out and with the utmost care taking Emi's pale hand, squeezing it gently in her own

"I am so sorry your heart is aching," she said softly

"I understand heartache, you could say my people are well-versed in it, the tide helps you heal and I understand that but my clan... we're here for now, and this place is the best place for us... if you let us stay here, just for a while, we can play our music for you and perhaps that will lessen the pain?"

Emi doubted it but she nodded solemnly anyway, it was better than nothing and the girl's kindness was sobering to her enough to realize how sharp her own words had been earlier

"I'm Bridget, what's your name?" she asked politely

"Emi," the pale girl replied with another sniff, tucking a few blond strands behind her ear

"Well Emi, the goddess has blessed us with this meeting today, won't you come and let us play for you?"

Emi stared at Bridget with all the skepticism and cynicism that only heartache can bring but she nodded once more in tired agreement

And she had to admit, Bridget's music was beautiful

It was something ancient, as strange as that may sound and of this Emi was sure

It was ancient and spell-binding and the sort of thing that you hear humans try to replicate with little to no success

There were violinists and flutists and percussionists and all sorts of other things

There were dancers and there were people who danced without knowing how

And then there was Bridget

And Bridget was a singer

A singer of the most beautiful songs Emi had ever heard, despite being in a language that Emi didn't understand or even recognize

Emi spent so long with Bridget and her clan, that she didn't even realize how late it was until she started to shiver from the chill in the air

"You've been out here all night dear girl, you should go home," Bridget finally said as she stared up at the dark sky

"I doubt anyone will care," Bridget sighed back

"I will care if you catch yourself a terrible cold and die, I will care," Bridget assured her

And it seemed like a truly confusing thought that someone who Emi so barely knew could truly care about her so very much, but she could see in her eyes and hear in her tone that Bridget was nothing if not completely serious and honest in her words

And so with reluctance Emi left, going back home and wondering later that night if this was all just a fanciful dream

She soon found however, that this was not a dream at all

For when she went back the next day, she found the same clan as before and this time it seemed that they had built a makeshift camp for themselves

There were some hammocks and the remnants of a fire from the night before but little else and Emi surmised that this must only be something to use in the midst of day

Surely they're staying somewhere more comfortable

Though what these people wanted with such a tiny hole of a secluded place when clearly they were travelers was a mystery to her

"Emi!!" Bridget shouted in delight, springing off of her feet and rushing over to the smaller girl

Emi blinked in surprise when Bridget tossed her arms around her and gave her a strong hug, smiling and resting her cheek on Emi's shoulder

"Oh! I'm so sorry, is this OK?" she asked suddenly, pulling away and staring at Emi as if she had just committed a grave sin

Emi, to shell-shocked to respond verbally, gave a firm if not slow nod and Bridget lit up, hugging her tightly once again

"Oh... oh good, oh yes good, you must NEVER touch someone against their will, that's SO important, you mustn't ever, ever do that" she said firmly

Emi tilted her head and awkwardly began hugging back when it became clear that Bridget wasn't letting go anytime soon

She thought it was an odd thing to say and certainly she had never been asked permission before someone touched her in the past but she nevertheless thought it was good form to do so

Perhaps this would prompt her to begin asking permission first as well, she never was all that comfortable with people touching her all of a sudden, she wondered still though why Bridget seemed too firm on the matter

Perhaps she figured, she had been hurt

But that wasn't for her to think about so she let it drop from her mind and allowed herself a gentle smile when the darker-haired girl pulled away

"Would you like to hear more music?"

And Emi said yes

This continued on and on and for many days Emi's friendship with Bridget and her strange kin went unchanging

SHE did put a stop to the constant stream of music by the third day though and convinced Bridget to play in the sand with her like children

She even dragged her new friend out and into town a few times

But no matter what she seemed to do she couldn't convince Bridget to go into the water with her

She thought it strange but not enough to concentrate on and she found herself so happy with the other girl that she even forgot about her the bookstore

However, this happiness only lived on for about a week before Emi found herself going to the beach to seek out a way to stop her sorrows once again

"You're leaving?" Emi asked quietly

The boy in front of her gave her a gentle smile and a short nod

"I'm getting MARRIED, I have to leave," he said softly

"But... I.. I don't ... this is so sudden,"

"Emi... come now, Sparrow and I have been together for an eternity, yet he lives so far away... surely you must have seen this coming," he said gently

"But... but why can't Sparrow come here?" she argued

"He HAS come here repeatedly, but he misses his family and... there are better opportunities for me there as an artist than there are here,"

"But now? Right now? I mean... Bash is going away too, to work at that hospital a few towns over and Abigail is going to take advanced courses and Valerie is going to college... and Cay is moving so far away to be Dylan.... everyone is leaving, everyone is going and I'm just.... here, I'm just here Gabe, please.."

"I'm sorry," he said softly pulling her into a soft hug

"I promise you Emi, you WILL find your way and when you do, I'm sure you'll leave too, there isn't much for anyone in this town, it isn't like we'll lose touch.."

She sniffed softly again and looked away

He said that, they ALL said that but Emi knew the truth

She had been through this enough before to know by now

Just because someone said they'd keep in touch and even if they intended to, it was no certain promise that they would

And often times people just... didn't

Maybe because they were busy or lost her contact information or just weren't settled in enough but...

Emi constantly found herself as someone to be moved on from, constantly in the situation of waiting for the phone to ring because she's already called so many times

She found that keeping in touch just didn't happen very easily

And she was used to it by now

Her friends came and went and she was used to it by now

What she wasn't used to or ready for, was the day that Bridget would eventually go too

And judging by the poor excuse of a camp sight, she predicted that time would be sooner rather than later

She felt truly and utterly alone and when she went to visit Bridget that day she found herself clinging to her like a child all evening

A few days passed and the pain in her heart really didn't heal, it still hurt as much as it did before and the longer she went on the more upset she became

Not only was she being left alone but she didn't have a path the way everyone else did

She had no calling, no mate, no potential....

She felt like she was destined for nothing, absolutely nothing

That is, until one day two weeks after she had first met Bridget, that she realized she may not be so useless after all

The day started out quietly enough but by afternoon it was chaos

Fishermen were hauling a great load of tuna onto the shore and reportedly they had caught something else in their wake

When Emi, Bridget and Bridget's clan went to investigate what it was from the other side of the beach, they found with horror that it was a man

As plain as a daisy he was, strung up in one of the nets and clutching what appeared to be a sealskin to his chest

He shouted and screamed in a strange language that Emi didn't understand.... but she did recognize it

It was the same language Bridget's songs were in

"Foraise..."

Bridget gasped in horror

Emi glanced around at the group and listened to one of the older women, possibly the group leader, try to instruct the others on what to do and where to go

The fishermen however, were in the process of emptying the nets and from what Emi could see one of them looked like he was now brandishing some sort or non-lethal gun

A tranquilizer perhaps

She had no idea what was going on but she did know she had to act fast

So she did something she absolutely never did, she acted on impulse and impulse alone

"Emi!!" Bridget hissed after her but Emi didn't listen nor did she slow down

She was on a mission and she was going to complete that mission come high tide or low tide!

So she marched closer and she ignored the fishermen when they tried to stop her

She threatened them with screaming and shouting for someone to help her if they tried to harm her and within a moment Bridget had come to

back her up, and then Bridget's clan after her

They had the fishermen cornered well enough, as Emi climbed onto the ship she found herself a gutting knife and dragged the blade through the rope of the net, spilling fish- and the mysterious boy- onto the deck

The boy hurried out what sounded like gratitude in the strange language and rushed towards the water with the sealskin

And as soon as he was half-submerged, he donned the skin over his body and disappeared beneath the waves

Emi, come to find out, seemed to have a talent for selkie saving

And this much to her shock, would not be the last time she encountered a selkie

In fact, it wasn't even her first!

Later that evening when Bridget and her clan finally got back to their usual place, the darker girl finally explained what was going on

"What you did for that selkie earlier today was so brave and kind," she mused quietly

"To be honest I didn't even no selkies existed until today, I thought they were just a myth," she confessed

"Yes, well... I assure you that they're much more than just that," she chuckled back

"Well, yes I can see that now," she chuckled, staring at the water and rising to her feet with a stretch

"I'm going for a swim, I know you don't want to but ... are you sure you don't want to?" she asked with a small frown

"I can't, trust me I want to... I just can't," she explained back

"Well can't you at least tell me why?"

Bridget smiled softly and stood up from where she had been perched on a nearby rock, twirling slowly in the same dress she had been wearing when she and Emi met

In fact, it was the same dress she had been wearing every day, now that Emi thought about it

"And for that matter why do you wear that dress all the time?" she asked bluntly

Now Bridget was starting to beam at her, a shy blush crossing over her cheeks

"This is where I keep my skin," she said softly

"Your... skin?" Emi repeated slowly

"My seal skin," Bridget replied with an eager nod, running her hands over the pleats again and winking at her friend

"It's very secure,"

"I can imagine," Emi said slowly

"You do believe me... don't you?" Bridget asked with a sad frown

"Of course I do," Emi replied quickly

It may have been strange but Bridget was an honest soul and as of today, Emi had officially seen stranger

Sort of...

"Don't selkies have to go back to the water at a certain time for good though?" she asked curiously

Bridget shook her head and smiled at her

"We can come ashore in the human realm once every seven years, the seven year mark starts the next time we enter the water,"

"So that's why you won't go swimming..."

"Exactly, my pod is leaving in another fourteen days, we're all heading back out together," she explained

Emi sighed sadly, hanging her head and looking down

She knew that Bridget would be leaving soon, it was only logical

But still, hearing it... actually hearing it... it hurt

It hurt badly

"Can't you stay here?" she asked quietly

Bridget shook her head, sighing sadly

"My people are known for heartbreak precisely because so many of us try to stay, we fall in love here in the human world and then we're forced to make a choice between our lover or our home, because so rarely are the humans willing to give up THEIR homes to become selkies and be with us... some of us decide to stay here and often end up losing their skins, having them stolen because of it, you shouldn't even know where mine is my dear but I trust you," she explained

"And without a skin you can never return home?"

"Aye, you see selkies don't live under the sea like it's commonly believed, we live in the faery world,"

"The faery world?" she asked softly

"Aye, it's a beautiful place, so different from the human world and yet... it maintains some of the same comforts,"

"You said that ... humans could become selkies?"

"Aye, but they don't want to leave their homes for love and it's not a choice that THEY have to make so-"

"But what if this doesn't feel like home anymore?" she asked quietly

"Then... I suppose that's a good reason to leave it for love," Bridget submitted

"Is.. is this why you don't like people touching without permission? Because you're afraid of having your skin stolen?" she asked suddenly

"Smart girl.... yes that's the reason, we're taught from birth when someone touches a selkie's skin, they never let go, especially the humans,"

For days Emi thought about that

About the selkies and the faery world and what life would be like in a place so different from this one

She asked questions almost endlessly but Bridget never seemed to tire of them

"Can you keep in contact long distance there?"

"Yes,"

"With this world even?"

"Yes,"

"Do people stay together more? Or travel more?"

"They do tend to stick together, especially group-oriented beings like selkies and werewolves,"

"Is becoming a selkie painful? Does it hurt when you take off your skin?"

"Not at all, it's like taking a coat on and off,"

"What do selkies DO?"

"Lots of things, what do humans do?"

"Are Fae Folk friendly?"

"Yes, very,"

It went on and on

And then three weeks after she met Bridget, Emi's world came to a stand still as she approached her home

"Dad? Was that Grandmother's car driving out of here?" she asked curiously

"Aye... it was," he sighed back heavily

"What's wrong? Why did she seem so upset?"

The older man looked at the floor, patting the seat beside him and ringing his hands

"Your grandmother had the paperwork for the house looked at, now that you're an adult .... she's taking the house Emi, it was technically her's to begin with as she paid for so much of it, she generously let us keep it during your childhood but now things are different and you're older and she wants it back,"

The girl felt her throat go dry, her mouth falling open and her eyes bulging

"She.... she can't do that...." she breathed

"She can and she has, we have to be out in two weeks," he sighed again

"But... but what will we do? Where will we go?"

"I've talked to John Welch about it, he offered me a position as keeper of the lighthouse but that's an old place, a dangerous place, it just ain't suited for more than one person... so I talked to Mrs. O'Malley and since Sebastian is going away-"

"I don't want to stay with Mrs. O'Malley!"

"Emi please, try to understand-"

"But I don't! I don't understand! We can't... we can't even keep our own home now!? First everyone else leaves and now we're being forced to also!?" she screamed, feeling her eyes start to prick with tears

Blast her fragile heart.. she took a deep breath, muttering something incoherently as she raced for the door and rushed out toward the spot by the water that she had come to love so much

"Emi? Emi what's wrong?" Bridget asked immediately when she spotted the human coming her way

"I can't do this anymore Bridget.... I... I need to go with you,"

"What? Emi... what are you talking about? Calm down," she urged softly

And so Emi told her

She explained the whole bloody affair

She told her about the bookstore, about her friends and her grandmother and the lighthouse

She told her about every single negative feeling she had and about how much this place had stopped feeling at home lately

About all of this and about her loneliness

She explained about how useless she felt and how amazing it had been to help that selkie earlier

She told her about how much she loved to be around Bridget

About how she had never felt this way before

And about how exhausting and old human life was getting as everyone seemed to leave and try to drag her away too

She was tired and she simply couldn't handle anymore

And for her part, Bridget seemed to understand this- she seemed to understand it and agree with it quite a bit in fact

So when Emi relayed her next request, the selkie's response caught her off guard

"I want to go with you, I want to be a selkie with you," she said softly, the hammock she was laying in swayed softly with her movements

"I'm not sure if that's such a good idea," Bridget said softly

Emi felt her heart sink and her mouth fall open, staring at her with shock and disappointment

"But... why?"

"You feel desperate right now and I don't want you to make a decision out of desperation, you know nothing about being a selkie-"

"Then teach me!"

Bridget sighed, glancing over her shoulder at the water for a long moment before staring back at Emi

"There are monsters down there," she said softly

"There are monsters up here," Emi argued

She nodded to that considerately, seeming to agree

"I still don't want you to decide out of desperation,"

"Then give me a week, tell me everything, teach me everything and if I so much as waver in this week... I won't do it," she compromised

They stared at each other for an achingly long time before Bridget exhaled, nodding slowly in agreement

"Alright, you have yourself a deal,"

Emi beamed, leaning closer and placing a hand on the selkie's cheek before pausing, blinking rapidly

"May I..?"

Bridget smiled, nodding slowly and closing her eyes, relaxing against the other girl as Emi placed her lips over the selkie's

One could say it was a seal of approval between the two of them

Over the next week, Emi took the task of deciding where she wanted to be very seriously

She considered everything there was to consider and asked more questions than anyone could really reasonably answer, and by the time it came the date for Bridget and her pod to return home, Emi had made up her mind

"I want to go with you," she said

Bridget stared at her with hard eyes and at first Emi feared that she would be rejected, but the selkie's face softened a moment later and she smiled, taking a step closer and cupping her cheek

"I want you to come with us too," she said softly

Emi beamed, leaning in and kissing her again in response

It may be rushed but sometimes, when life throws us tough choices like this and you have to make a choice- it's better to take a risk

When you're given the chance to make a choice, for better or worse, it's always better to choose than to just stay stagnant and let life make your choices for you

Sometimes, you'll find not making a decision is even worse than making a bad one when fate is involved

And so Emi didn't make that mistake

She made her choice

And she found the next evening as she swam away with Bridget and her pod, it seemed to have been a good choice to make

The Littlest Trick-Or-Treaters

Once upon a time

In a land that many referred to as The Land Of Monsters

There lived a very special kind of monster

These monsters were called Ruggies, because of how much they resembled little fuzzballs that came off of rugs

They were small and came in a variety of colors and had lots of big, fluffy hair coating their bodies

They were fluffy with twigs and twinges of fur that stuck out like it had been shocked with electricity and they sported huge eyes, tiny mouths covered by their fur, and twig-like arms and legs with little claws where their fingernails and toenails should be

And of course, they were absolutely harmless

Ruggies really weren't scary like some monsters were, they were more slight annoyances than anything as far as the humans were concerned

Because you see, when Ruggies hide under the bed or in the closet or under the rug, no one runs screaming or is scared to go back to sleep, they were usually just confronted with a broom and a roll of one's eyes

It was actually a little disheartening but the Ruggies didn't care, they're a simple folk who are really just happy to be around

And if there was one thing Ruggies liked more than anything- like most monsters- it was Halloween

Ah yes, Halloween, the happiest day of the year for nearly all inhabitants of the monster world!

Halloween was the one day a year they could go to the human world and truly be themselves without having to worry about judgment or fear

It was the one day when they could be spooky and creepy and all around freaky and scary and no one would mind!

It was the one day a year when humans could set eyes on them and have a happy scare and not a sincere one, when they could scream from initial shock and fright but then laugh it off afterwards like a good joke

Monsters, you see, don't like being TRULY scary

They don't like giving little humans nightmares or upsetting them or making them cry

They just want to be friends and explore the human world like everyone else

And if that means that they end up scaring humans... well... that's a very unfortunate side effect

But Halloween?

Halloween is an entirely different ball game

It's when humans and monsters can all be together in harmony and it's wonderful!

The Ruggies, of course, don't get quite as much pleasure from it as the others do

Ruggies never scare anyone, they're almost always laughed away no matter what time of year it is

But they do understand the cultural significance of the holiday and they also are very fond of all things that Halloween encompasses

Like joy and friendship and the season of autumn

And "bad luck" and costumes and candy

Ohh candy, their FAVORITE part of Halloween!!

Unfortunately though, monsters typically don't trick-or-treat like the humans

They prefer to spend their Halloweens going around and interacting with as many humans as possible

Most monsters are pretty friendly after all, it's really only the ones born and raised in human society who have to hide their true natures all the time that get grumpy and sour around socializing

But monsters from the monster world are always happy to indulge in human pleasantries, for they find the humans quite fascinating, not unlike how humans might view unicorns and faeries

This of course means that they can't take the time out to do something as tedious and mundane as trick-or-treating, they have to spend their time wandering the streets, ducking into parties, and sneaking into stores

At least, that's true of all monsters except for two:

Rirk and Ookie

Two Ruggy siblings who absolutely loved Halloween and were more excited than anything for the prospect of going trick-or-treating

They were finally going to get their chance this year, after explaining to their mother how much it would mean to them and that they had their entire lives to get to know the humans better, but that this time- just this time, while they were still young- they'd like to experience the joy of trick-or-treating

And their mother, being a very kind and understanding mother, agreed

With that Rirk and Ookie did something that no Ruggy had ever done before

They went trick-or-treating

But before they could do that of course, they would need costumes

You couldn't get candy without costumes- even if the humans thought that Ruggies were costumes all on their own

Rirk picked out a cowboy hat and a bandanna

And Ookie decided on a police hat and a badge

And with their simple but effective costumes in place (and two pumpkin shaped baskets to put all of their candy in) the Ruggy siblings set off for the human world with the rest of their family

It seemed every Ruggy that was in close relation to them wanted to join them just to be safe

After all, humans were unpredictable and could be wild, no one knew for sure what would set them off and turn them from strange but generally harmless creatures into the cold-blooded, blood-thirsty fiends of the movies that monsters watched with popcorn and blankets- and that usually gave them nightmares

The Ruggies had never heard of humans killing one of their kind before but it was always possible so they wanted to be careful

Rirk and Ookie understood, they were just happy to be out enjoying the night and even happier to be participating in trick-or-treating

So as soon as a gaggle of children was spotted, the two Ruggies jumped at the chance and joined them without hesitation or reason

No one seemed to care apparently, as a magic wand was waved in front of the door just a moment before the doorbell rang

Rirk and Ookie were shocked and pleased to find that the magic wand did its trick and only a few seconds later the door opened with a nice old woman standing in the doorway

They were pretty surprised by this turnout, they hadn't expected to find witches so young and already so talented in this world

"Why hello there," The kind old woman said as she reached for a bowl of candy

"TRICK OR TREAT!" shouted the gaggle of children

Rirk and Ookie exchanged looks

They couldn't say "Trick or treat"

Ruggies couldn't speak in human tongues, only squeak and squeal for communication

There was just no way they could say the words, but it seemed awfully important to the ritual that the words were said in the Ruggies' opinions

And so, because their mother was very kind and very smart, she devised a way for them to say what they needed to say

She found a little box with some holes in it that recorded human voices and played them back

So whenever Rirk and Ookie went to a house to tick-or-treat, Rirk would press the button on the little device and a chant of "Trick or treat!" would play out

After receiving candy, Ookie would press the button again and blip out a little "Thank you!"

It seemed to be a great system and the grown-up humans always seemed kind of impressed, a little more than fascinated, as they happily handed over the candy to the Ruggies

All in all it was a very successful Halloween for the Ruggy siblings

It was, in fact, that Halloween that changed all Halloweens

For you see after Rirk and Ookie's success at trick-or-treating, the next year came and several other Ruggies wanted to give it a go as well

And the same thing happened the third year

And the same on the fourth

On the fifth

And so on and so forth, until it became a tradition that while other monsters went about their socializing, the Ruggies trick-or-treated with human children

In fact, it became so popular, that some children even started to dress up as Ruggies (though they never looked anything near the real things, it was a valiant effort anyway)

Many people were confused by the Ruggies having such a limited vocabulary as "Trick or treat" and "Thank you" but it was Halloween so they didn't really bother to question it

The Ruggies thought it was a success and each year always ended up getting a little more candy than they expressly wanted so that they could share it with some of the other monsters returning from the human world who hadn't gotten the chance to go trick-or-treating

It was for this reason- among many others- that the Ruggies are by far the most well liked species in the monster realm

That, and of course their friendly and social nature

Slowly, very slowly, word began to spread about the Ruggies

No one knew exactly who started to gossip first or how humans took to the idea so quickly, but before long the Ruggies had become a tale as popular as the legend of the Boogeyman (a complete mispronouncement of the species name but humans had so much trouble speaking other languages it was expected)

What few realize though, is that the tale of the Ruggies is not fictional as many have come to believe it is

It's full truth

And so if you see a little ball of fuzz around your house that seems to be alive, watch out, for it may just be

And if you see a little ball of fuzz out trick-or-treating on Halloween, be sure to give some extra candy, for it may just be a Ruggy

The Lonely Hearts Of Heather And Tristan

Once upon a time

In a land very much like our own- but a very long time ago-

There lived a girl named Rebekah

Rebekah found herself falling in love with a boy named Jordan

And Jordan found himself falling in love right back

But this isn't where the story ends

For you see, this is in a land a very long time ago, when that land first started to form in fact, meaning that Rebekah and Jordan were two of the first souls ever born of that world

And the love they shared was so strong, and so new, that they became irrevocably attached to each other

They fell in love so deeply that they became a fairytale- but this is not their fairytale, this is the fairytale belonging to someone who knew them

For you see, a love that strong, in a land so empty, creates a very special kind of magic

It creates the magic of life- not in children, though they had plenty of those- but in energy

The love that Jordan and Rebekah shared was indeed so strong, that the energy between them became alive

It formed into a living, sentient form, taking the shape of a faery at times, a ghost at others, and a human girl at others still

This energy was the purest kind of energy that could ever be created, for it was born from the magic of true love

The creature took her first breath in a field of heather, and so that is what she decided to name herself: Heather

But Heather soon found the world to be a lonely place

For she most often took the form of a ghost or a faery, a wisp in the wind, not quite formless but not solid or fully shaped either

It took too much out of her to take human form and when she did it lasted for only short, exhausting bursts and she never could manage to accomplish her goal: To be noticed

For Rebekah and Jordan, as in love as they were, didn't notice what they had done

They had love to spare and it was exactly that spare part that detached from them and formed its own energy

For decades Heather lived alone, the only one of her kind

She wasn't quite alive, but certainly not dead, and even the few people who saw her couldn't build much more than a short acquaintanceship with her

Heather, who was born of true love, one day came to the realization that she would never experience true love herself, for she was the only one of her kind

And the thought broke her fragile heart, and made her drift deeper and deeper into the wind, existing less and less until she was but a wisp

One hundred years after Rebekah and Jordan fell in love, another couple found the same rapture that they had

Sarah and Angelique fell in love with the same heart-stopping emotion that Rebekah and Jordan had

They were filled with so much love for each other that it overflowed, spilling past what their bodies or even their souls could hold, and creating something else, a living, sentient wisp in the wind

This being, not a ghost, nor a faery, nor a human, called himself Tristan, for it was the name of Angelique's late brother and it seemed only right

For a very long time, Tristan wandered the same way that Heather once had, searching for a true love that he was starting to believe wasn't there

However, because Tristan was born second, and there was in fact another like him somewhere in the world, he refused to give up searching

He ached to find true love the way Angelique and Sarah had

He was desperate for affection and touch

And he would do anything for someone to notice him

Anything, like taking the advice of a very old troll, who was probably not the most trustworthy of sorts

The troll told Tristan that if he wished to find his true love, he would sing a song of merriment each and every day on the highest point of the tallest mountain, and she would fall from the sky and into his arms

Tristan, being born of true love and not knowing the ways of tricky sorts, took this to heart

And from that day forth, he climbed every day to the highest point of the tallest mountain and sang to the sky a song of merriment

A song of hope and happiness and love

He sang and sang until he was exhausted

And yet for a very long time nothing came of it

Until one day, on the thirteenth day of the thirteenth month that he had spent singing for a true love to come from the sky

She did

Although she didn't fall into Tristan's arms the way the troll had said she would

Heather had been so intrigued by the singing that never seemed to end, that she departed herself from the clouds and for the first time in many years she took on a ghostly form and visited the person making such disruptions

And from the moment she saw him, she realized that he was like her

It was love at first sight

Love born of love

Two spirits intertwining together for all of eternity

Becoming soulmates before anyone even knew what soulmates were

From that moment on, Heather and Tristan decided that every now and then, every century they thought, on the thirteenth day of the thirteenth year of the turn of the century, they would incarnate into human form and spend a human life time together

Every century they search

And every century they find each other and fall in love all over again

But when they aren't searching

When they aren't human

They stay high up above the clouds, watching the descendants of the children born from the same loves that they were born from, and marveling in each other's presence

Never alone

Not anymore

Soulmates

Forevermore

The Man With No Thyme

Once upon a time

A long time ago

There lived a man

He was not a king

He was not a prince

Nor a knight

By many standards, in fact, he wasn't special at all

He was very ordinary

Very simple

In a realm where lived magic, and kings and queens, and faeries and monsters, this man was especially plain

But there was one thing that made him unique

One thing he had that no one else in the entire kingdom had

No one else in the entire realm had

And that thing, that special thing that belonged just to him, is what would ultimately save his life

For you see this very ordinary man became very sick

He worked in an herb shop and went to dabble in the plants, searching for something special for a young bride that wanted the most effective fertility potion that could be made

For this, the man needed some very special herbs, but in his journey to find them, his hands brushed across a plant- an unfamiliar plant, one that he had no way of knowing was poisonous

That night the man fell ill

And over the coming days he only grew worse and worse

But there were few people who knew or even cared of what he was going through

He had a small herb shop, no living relatives, and was a quiet, shy sort who had trouble making relationships last

There were few who knew who he was, much less that he had fallen ill

But there was one person who knew it more keenly than anyone

This one person who came by the herb shop every day for a single sprig of Thyme

And every day the owner of the shop asked him why he didn't just buy more than one sprig

To which the customer would reply, with a smirk, "Because I always need more Thyme,"

When he went by the shop that day and found the owner of the store barely standing, he made it his personal mission to ensure that he didn't get any worse

"Why are you bothering yourself with me so much?" the very simple man asked

"Because, what if I run out of Thyme?" the customer replied

The owner thought it was very peculiar- of course, the customer was always very peculiar- but he was too exhausted and ill to inquire any further about it

"You could at least tell me your name, o' Knight In Shining Armor," the very simple man said some time after the other man had managed to drag him into the back of the herb store where he often rested

"Does it really matter?" the customer asked in return

There was quiet for a moment, before the owner of the shop spoke up again

"Jasmine," he said quietly

"Excuse me?"

"My name, it's Jasmine,"

The other man turned, staring at him as if he were surely lying

"Your name," he said slowly, tugging on the owner of the store's beard, "is Jasmine?" he repeated

"Yes, do you see why I don't advertise?"

Instead of laughing or poking fun or even agreeing with him, the other male just nodded

"This is where you tell me your name," Jasmine tried again

"It doesn't matter," the other male insisted again

They did not speak of names again

Try as he might, the man who always needed Thyme could not stop Jasmine from getting sicker

He watched the hours melt into days and the days pass into nights and Jasmine grew sicker still

Until finally, one day, the man who always ran out of Thyme, decided to find out what was making the other man so ill

He found the plant and recognized how unusual it was, and- because the man who always ran out of Thyme was a very smart man- he plucked a sprig of it with gloves on and took it to the nearest physician

"I know what to do," he said upon his return

And though he was barely coherent, he told Jasmine what the physician had told him, that it was a very rare plant that few had studied, but that

there was a cure for the poisoning two days North of there, nearest to the palace

"It's perfect," the man with no Thyme insisted

"There's a grocer who goes up to the palace every third day of the week at mid-day, that's in only an hour, I can tell him and he can bring back the antidote twice as fast having clearance from the king,"

"No grocer will help me Thyme,"- as Jasmine had come to call him- replied the man

"But ... he has to,"

"No, he doesn't, and neither does the king, no one has to do anything, not for me,"

Thyme stared at him with the most painful mixture of understanding and reluctance

"It's OK," Jasmine said quietly

"It's OK, you can have this,"

Thyme stared at him in confusion, shaking his head slowly and Jasmine reached out, touching the floor he was resting on

"This," he repeated

"You can have this,"

As if tumbling down on him, Thyme suddenly understood everything at once and he gave a sharp shake of his head, his heart pounding in his chest

"No!" he shouted

"No, no I won't take your store-"

"It's yours, I'm giving it to you-"

"It's yours, it's still yours, I'm not letting you die,"

Jasmine stared at him, giving the slightest, humorless laugh

"I don't believe you have a choice,"

Thyme shook his head still, rising to his feet and walking towards the door

And for the first time Jasmine felt a true pang of hurt from the other male

For the first time since he was only a child, Jasmine was really, truly, afraid of being alone

He had made peace with death

But he did not wish to die alone

"Please... please don't go," he asked quietly

"I'm sorry," Thyme said in a barely choked breath

But just as the shop owner's heart began to sink, he went on

"I'm going, to get you the cure, I'm going, and you'll stay here and rest, I'll pay for someone to look after you,"

"I can't let you do that," Jasmine said quietly

"I don't think you're going to 'let' me do anything, I'm pretty sure I'm my own person and I don't need your permission, your blessing, or your even acceptance to do what I want to do,"

There was utter silence

A standstill that they both knew was never going to have a different outcome

But Thyme stayed

He stayed until mid-day when someone came to take his place

You see the man who owned the herb store was very ordinary

He was very simple and plain

He was not a king or a queen, he was not a prince or a knight

He was not, by most standards, important

Not even to himself

But he was to one person

And that one person was what the owner of the herb shop had, that no one else in the entire kingdom, in the entire world had

Someone who loved him

Without condition

Without cause

Without anything to offer or anything to take

Without anything but the beating of his heart

And that person, who loved without condition or cause or even reason, was willing to give up all of himself just for the chance at saving the life of a man who, until only three days ago, he had never even learned the name of

The man with no Thyme traveled

He fought

He traded away and was given barely anything back for his efforts

And he was wearing thin

Wearing tired

Wearing hungry and cold and restless

But he traveled still

And when he returned to the town that was two days south of the palace, he found Jasmine near death

"Don't die," he said quietly as he pressed the bottle of potion to the very plain man's lips

"I need more time, please, don't die,"

It took three tries, each more frantic than the last, before finally the so hard won liquid made it past Jasmine's lips

"Don't die," the man with no Thyme repeated, pulling Jasmine closer and resting his head in his lap

"I need more time, please... please don't die,"

The man with no Thyme took the very plain and simple man's hand in his own, he curled their fingers together and he squeezed- begging, begging for just a little more time

And he closed his eyes and waited

When he woke hours later, he found a blanket wrapped around his shoulders and Jasmine sitting beside him, peeling the peel off of an apple and cutting a slice of it off to hand to the man with no Thyme

"I expected you to sleep longer, I'm not quite all better yet, I still can't stand."

"But you're getting there," the man with no Thyme reasoned

"I'm getting there," Jasmine agreed, taking a bit of his piece of the apple

For the longest time, neither of them spoke, before finally Jasmine broke the silence again

"Why do you always come in here just to buy one sprig of Thyme, when you know you'll need more the next day? Why don't you just buy enough for a week at once?"

"Because I always need more time," he replied with a smile, moving a little closer

"How else was I going to see you enough to build up the courage to ask.. if you were spoken for? I needed more time to build up my courage, and if I didn't see you every day, I would never have enough time,"

All at once everything seemed to make sense and Jasmine swallowed hard, trying to push the strange choking feeling out of his throat and breathe through it

This man braved things for him, put everything he had into a possibly fruitless journey for him, made excuses for him, lived a poem for him...

And all he ever wanted was time

Just enough

Just one more sprig

Just enough to ask Jasmine if he might feel the same way that the man with no time did

"What's your name?" Jasmine asked again

"I don't have one," he finally replied

He noticed Jasmine's quizzical look and took a breath in, quickly trying to correct himself

"My mother died when I was born, ever since... no one has ever given me a name that I can keep, it just changes over and over again so... why should I bother getting attached to one? Why are names really so important?"

"Because it's a part of you," Jasmine explained quietly

"OK, so ... I've given a lot to you, why don't you give me something back then?"

Jasmine was quiet, pulling his own blanket tighter around his shoulders

"You want me to name you?" he asked quietly

The man gave a small shrug, moving closer still and placed a hand against Jasmine's cheek

"I don't have any better ideas," he replied

"What if I can't think of one? I can't... I don't know, I can't think of ... I don't know..."

"That's OK," he shrugged, closing his eyes and pressing a chaste kiss on Jasmine's lips

"I've got time,"

You see although the very plain and simple shopkeeper lacked nearly everything, and although he was never truly anyone important- no one to remember in the history books or write about in papers- he was important to one person

He was important to the man who suddenly had plenty of time

He was important to a man named Sage

The Mermaid And The Wish

Once upon a time

In a cottage by the sea

There lived a girl

But we aren't starting our story with the girl

Instead, we're starting with a mermaid

A beautiful mermaid with long, embery hair and eyes as green as emeralds

One day she and her pod were swimming through the sea, as they always did, in the midst of their migration on their way to warmer waters, as it had gotten quite cold recently

But sadly, they never made it to their destination, for half-way through the journey something happened

A huge, metal something that had caught aflame and suddenly fell from the sky and into the ocean, straight in the path of the pod

The ocean was disturbed, the waves were angry, and the pod was separated despite their attempts to stay together

This mermaid in particular was slushed and sloshed all throughout the waves, so much so that she was thrown into a nearby rock and hit her head, thus knocking her unconscious

When she woke, she found herself washed ashore on a beach

Raising her head and trying to blink the weariness from her eyes, the mermaid stared out at the sea and looked down, wondering why she could breathe on land with such ease

And when she looked down, she found that in place of the beautiful blue tail she usually sported, she had a pair of legs instead

Swallowing, she looked around more, trying to get an idea of where she was, but to no avail

Pulling her legs a little bit closer to herself, she ran her fingers through her hair, grimacing at the clumps of sand that were tangled within the strawberry locks

"Hey!! Hey!! Are you alright!?"

The mermaid tensed at the sound of another voice, turning curiously and seeing a human girl running up to her

She had beautiful dark skin and bouncy, kinky black hair, and legs...

Human legs...

Which really shouldn't have surprised the mermaid, after all she WAS on land now

"Miss!! Are you OK?!"

"I... I'm fine," the mermaid answered, and stared with a bit of frustration at the ground, being out of water for so long was apparently drying out her voice

"Why are you out here alone on the beach? And so early in the morning too,"

Or late at night depending on your perspective, but the sun was up so she was going with morning for now

"I ... washed ashore," the mermaid replied

"I'm a mermaid, my pod was... separated, I was injured and when I woke here I was," she explained, immediately starting to climb to her feet

"A mermaid?" the human girl huffed

"Yes, yes I.. I must get back to my pod," she replied, hissing in pain as she put weight on her arms to lift herself up

"Wait a second, I think you're mistaken," the human girl said as she rushed to the other's side and took her hands, helping her up

"I'm not, I'll show you," she insisted, tearing away and running into the water

"Wait a second!" the other girl shouted, watching in amazement as the mermaid crashed into the waves and, indeed, her legs slowly began to form together and fade into a beautiful blue tail

"Do you see now? I must return to my pod," she replied, retreating further into the waves but pausing as she cried out in pain, grasping her right arm in her left hand and cringing

"Wait... you're hurt aren't you?" The human girl asked as she kicked her shoes off and rushed into the water after her

"It... it's nothing," the mermaid lied

"Hardly nothing, look at how red it is," the human replied with a pinched look, gently taking the mermaid's arm and looking it over spotting the rush of red skin over her forearm and biting her lip

"You say you need to find your pod... but is there no chance that they could find you here?" she asked

The mermaid stared at her a bit skeptically, hanging her head and sighing

"Yes... if I'm gone for very long, they'll come looking for me,"

"Then allow me to help you, just until your arm heals, you can't swim like this can you?"

"Why? Why do you care? And why aren't you more alarmed with what I am? I know of humans, I know how you are, this is highly unusual,"

The human sighed, looking away

"I promise I'll tell you but.... just not here,"

The mermaid stared at her for a moment, as much as she hated to admit it, the human girl was right, without her arm in working order she really couldn't swim like she needed to in order to find her pod- or at all really

"Alright," she said after a moment of hesitation

"I'm Ciara, by the way,"

The human gave her a small smile and began the process of pulling her to shore

"And I'm Misty, it's nice to meet you,"

To the surprise of absolutely no one, Ciara's first request upon entering Misty's home was to be back in the water

Misty had just rolled her eyes and insisted she follow her upstairs to the bathroom so she could rest in the tub

Misty's home was nice, it was right on the beach up on a slope with a front yard that still had smatterings of sand in it and the beach right out her back door rather than a yard

The neighborhood was considerably sparse in order to give each house a generous amount of yard space, meaning that her home- being the last one at the end of the road- was especially secluded

She lived there alone with her cat, Pepper, who Ciara was especially amused with

After all, she had heard of cats before but this being her first time on land she had never seen one

The bath, however, she felt there was something to be desired with

"How do you humans stand it in such a cramped space? There's hardly any water," Ciara complained as she twitched and squirmed in the tub

"Well, most of us don't have tails to accommodate." Misty replied with a shrug, reaching into the cabinet under the sink to pull out the first aid kit

"I knew someone once who spoke of mermaids, he spoke so highly of them... he said if ever I were to meet one, to be kind and generous,"

"So you're helping me as some sort of... what? Karmic favor?"

"Something like that,"

She nodded slowly, staring down at the water and swept her long hair over one shoulder, playing with the ends

"Do humans have pods?" Ciara asked after a moment

"Some do, in a way," Misty shrugged back, setting a roll of bandages down on the counter

"Do you have a pod?"

Misty was quiet, staring at the bandages before taking a few jars of cream out of the box

"No,"

"Oh..."

Wordlessly, Misty crossed back over to the tub and set the medical supplies on the floor, reaching out for the mermaid's arm

"How long will it take for me to heal?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, it just depends on how bad the wound is, unfortunately there's no way of knowing, I can't exactly take you to a doctor after all,"

"I suppose..."

There was a longer pause as she started wrapping up her arm, neither fully concentrated on anything in particular

"Don't humans usually stop believing in mermaids at some point? In the stories and the ... the magic?"

"Most do,"

"You didn't,"

Misty just shrugged, not furthering the subject

"Why don't you have a pod?"

"Because I'm alone," she snapped, standing quickly and hurrying to put everything away before heading for the bathroom door

"I'm going to make food, you relax here,"

Ciara frowned, watching sadly as the other girl left, but doing nothing to stop her

Misty gave her a guest room to sleep in later that night, it was odd

But then again it was all odd

The food and the housing and the walking and the... the CAT...

Everything about the human world was just ... strange...

Even Misty herself

"Why are you in here?" the human sighed as she felt the weight of the mattress shift underneath her

"I want to sleep," Ciara replied

"That's why I gave you the guest room,"

"But I don't want to sleep there, it's lonely, why on earth would anyone want to sleep alone?"

"Do merfolk NOT sleep alone?"

"Of course not, that's dangerous! We all sleep in a pile with the rest of our pod!"

Misty groaned, rolling her eyes, this was not at all what she had bargained for...

"...Alright, fine, but just for one night, I am NOT letting this end up like it did with the cat," she sighed

Unfortunately, that didn't seem to stick

"Night Misty," the mermaid hummed the next night as she slipped into Ciara's bed

"Good night Ciara," the human replied, huffing as Pepper stomped over her and crawled between them

It took a few moments but suddenly the realization struck Misty that something wasn't right here

"Wait a second... Ciara! Oh you CANNOT be asleep that fast!"

She was in fact, asleep that fast

The mermaid stayed in Misty's home for weeks, hoping each day that she would be found by her pod

And each day her hope dwindled little by little

By the fourth week her arm had healed, meaning that if she wanted to she could go back

She could leave the land for as long as she wanted and go back to the sea

But her pod still hadn't found her yet

"Ciara!! Ciara!!!" Misty screamed as she ran down the slope of the beach, clutching her sweater tightly around her and sighing in relief at seeing the mermaid standing in front of the shore, watching the waves beat up against the land, like a perfect harmony, like a meeting point

"Cia what's the matter with you? I thought I'd lost you! What are you doing out here?" Misty asked in a panic

"They aren't coming back for me... are they?" Ciara asked quietly, wistfully, as if she wasn't fully there

"What?"

"My pod... they aren't coming back... they should have swum through

here by now and if they did they would've noticed I was here... they really aren't coming for me..."

"Ciara... I'm sure that isn't true-"

"Why don't you have a pod?" she interrupted suddenly, turning around and shivering as a cold wind blew against her

Misty was quiet for a long moment before slowly shrugging her sweater off and stepping closer, wrapping it around the mermaid's shoulders

"I don't because I'm a foster kid OK?"

"What... does th-"

"It means that I'm alone, I don't have any parents and every family I've been to hasn't wanted me enough to keep me, so I'm alone, that's why I don't have a pod,"

Ciara looked down sadly, not daring to say a word, and a long moment of silence passed between them before Misty sighed and wrapped an arm around the other girl, leading her towards the house again

"Come on you crazy fish person, let's get inside before we freeze to death out here,"

Ciara didn't move immediately, but eventually the wind pushed her forward and she found herself inside again, staring out one of the floor length windows of Misty's living room and wrapping herself in more comfy blankets on the couch as the human brought two mugs of hot chocolate to her

"Do merfolk often abandon each other?" the human asked as she sat down across from the mermaid, handing her a cup of hot chocolate

"Sometimes but... not often no,"

"And do you think your pod is the type to have done that?"

Ciara sniffled slightly, shaking her head and sipping at her drink

"No..."

"Then why don't you have any more faith?"

"Because... when my pod was separated... this thing fell out of the sky,"

"Something fell out of the sky?" Misty asked in confusion

The mermaid nodded, looking down sadly

"This big metal thing that had caught aflame..."

"The plane crash..." Ciara mumbled, leaning against the back of the couch and swallowing tensely

"What?"

"A few weeks ago, a plane crashed into the ocean... that must be what you're talking about,"

"Oh... I see..." she sighed back, pulling her knees closer to her chest

"Ciara... do you think your pod abandoned you... or do you think they... do you think they're no longer with us?"

The mermaid looked away, closing her eyes

"I don't know what to think anymore,"

Misty bit the inside of her lip, placing her mug on the coffee table and crawling closer

She had grown extremely fond of the mermaid these past few weeks

Ciara was the family she had always wanted, she was a friend, she was someone who Misty was finding herself falling in love with, but she knew...

If there was any chance of ever finding her family, or anyone who loved her... Misty would certainly want the chance to take it

"Go find them," she said softly, gently taking the mermaid's hands in her's and giving them a squeeze

Ciara stared at her oddly, pinched features and tight jaw

"What?"

"Your pod, go find them,"

"But... I want to stay with you," she insisted

Misty leaned back, tilting her head in confusion

"I don't understand.... you don't like it on land, you miss your pod, your arm is healed, why would you want to stay here?"

"Because of you," Ciara replied immediately, leaning closer and cupping the human's face

"I want to stay because of you," she explained, pulling her a bit closer and pressing a gentle kiss to her lips, stroking her fingers through her hair

"Even though your family could be out there?" she asked quietly, wrapping her fingers around Ciara's hand

"If they were there, and they were looking for me, they would have been here by now,"

"But what if they're looking for the rest of your pod too? What if you weren't the only one separated?"

Ciara was quiet for a long moment, never quite answering and staring down at the floor

"You haven't even considered it? Cia-"

"I want to stay," She repeated, quickly taking Misty's hand and kissing her palm gently

Misty was quiet for a moment, tightening her grip on Ciara's hand slightly

"And I want you to stay... but I also want you to find your pod, we're going out there Ciara, if I have to take a boat... whatever, but we're not going to give up,"

The mermaid was quiet, leaning closer and gently wrapping her arms around the other girl and closing her eyes

For the first time in weeks she felt home

But she didn't let it stop there

The next morning she rolled out of bed, grabbed Misty's sweater, and headed outside, taking one more glance at Ciara, asleep in her bed, before rushing out

Unbeknownst to her, however, she did not leave unnoticed

"Nnn... no no... Pep... stop..." Misty groaned, rolling over and wrapping the sheets tighter around herself as she tried to ignore the licking of her cat

"Peppeeeeeeeeer," she grumbled, tossing over again and squirming

"Hey... Cia... make 'er quit..." she grumbled

After a few moments of no response, Misty cracked her eyes open

"Ciara?" she mumbled, sitting straight up when she realized that the mermaid wasn't there

"Ciara!" she called out again, leaping out of bed and reaching for her sweater, only to find it gone

Narrowing her eyes, she slid on her slippers and raced to the stairs, heading outside the second she was near the door and shivering immediately at the freezing air

"CIARA!!" she shouted, rushing down the slope of the beach

"CIARA!!"

There was no response but she knew Ciara heard her

She could see the distinct color of her sweater right by the shore

"Ciara..." she breathed, rushing closer and gently pulling on the mermaid's arm

She turned around, holding something clutched against her chest as she stared at the human in front of her

"Ciara what-"

"Merry Christmas,"

They were both quiet for a moment before Misty looked down at what Ciara was holding

It was a seashell, plain as day, nothing really spectacular about it in all honesty

"Um... thank you Ciara... it's ... very nice-"

"No no, you don't understand," the mermaid interrupted quickly

"Then...?"

"It's a magic shell,"

"A... magic shell...?"

"Yes... you make a wish on it and it'll come true, there are very few limits, I mean... you can't wish for more wishes or bring back the dead or make someone fall in love with you but... tomorrow is Christmas and I... I wanted to give it to you then but you sort of ruined the surprise,"

Misty smiled softly, wrapping her arms around the mermaid and hugging her tightly

"Thank you, it's the best gift I've ever gotten, thank you."

"Of course of course, but don't leave me waiting in suspense, what are you going to wish for?"

Misty smirked, clutching the shell to her chest and taking a breath before handing it back and walking towards the shore

"Why don't I show instead of tell?" she replied, stepping into the waves, and Ciara watched in amazement as the water brushed against the girl's

feet, and only a few more steps into the water she found herself with a gorgeous orange tail where her legs should be

Ciara stared at her in shock, eyes wide and heart pounding, of all of the things Misty could have wished for...

Inhaling deeply, she allowed a grin to split across her face before rushing to the water and diving in

Now they could truly look for her pod together

And maybe, with some luck, they would BOTH have the family they so badly craved

The Moving Mountains

Once upon a time

In a land far and wide

There lived a boy by the name of Robin, for he was small and fragile like a bird

Or so his mother used to say

Robin was a very lonely child, despite being friendly

For children are cruel and adults are full of malice

But Robin considered this OK, he had his mother and that was all that really mattered

But the older he got, the more this began to change

With age came reality and reality would not allow the bright summer days that once existed

The older Robin got the more he started to lose the only friend he had ever had

"I have to work," she would say some days

"You're a big boy now, go play on your own," she insisted on others

"You need more friends, go make friends," she pushed still

To Robin, he wasn't "growing up," he was experiencing the indescribable pain of having the one and only person who ever truly cared about him slowly- achingly, tortuously slowly- pull away from him and leave him all alone

"Oh please," he'd beg, "Just one more game,"

If he could have just one more game, he thought, he would never ask for another thing

But adults have such funny ideas about growing up

And the world has such cruel ideals about being grown up

With age does not come maturity

With age comes loss

Comes loneliness

Comes cruelty

And at the age of ten, Robin had known these things so well that they were burned into his skin

Perhaps his mother was trying too hard

Perhaps she really didn't understand what it was doing to him

Or perhaps she was just trying to thicken his skin for the inevitable day when someone would come along and make a cut far worse, and far deeper than she ever could

It didn't matter to Robin, it hurt all the same

But he was so tired of trying to tell her this that one day he just stopped trying

And he was too used to the world telling him that boys don't cry but he couldn't stop crying

He ran far, far, far into the woods

Because there had to be somewhere far, far, away where people weren't this cold

Where they wouldn't hear him crying

Where no one would care what other grown ups thought

And so he ran and ran and ran

Further and further and further into the woods

Until finally he ran out of energy and came to a stop

And when he took a few heavy gasps to catch his breath, he found that he was completely, and utterly lost

He had never been this far into the woods before

And he had never been out so very late before, as the sun was starting to set and he was getting cold

He felt even lonelier than before, and freezing cold and terribly afraid

For he was only ten years old and far too young to be growing up

Suddenly, he heard the sounds of bushes rustling and backed up into a tree behind him, his small body shaking like a leaf

The rustling continued and Robin thought for sure that he must be done for, so he collapsed to the forest floor and hugged himself tightly, as if that would somehow put up a barrier between himself and whatever danger was stalking his way

"What on earth are you doing?" he heard

But when Robin looked up, there was no one there

No one but a fox

"I said, what are you doing?" came the voice again

"Who's there?" Robin breathed, sniffing loudly and trying to keep his nose from running any worse than it already had

"Good luck," seemed to say the chill of the wind

"I'm here," replied that same voice

Robin stared forward, watching as the fox sat down in front of him, peacefully and calmly, staring at him with curiosity

"Fox?" he breathed

"Yes?" came the voice

"How are you talking to me? I ... you aren't even moving your mouth?"

The fox seemed to laugh, a low and mature laugh that didn't seem to quite fit with his playful personality

"We do not talk the way humans talk- with our mouths and our scratchy little voices- we speak through the trees, the forest is our voice."

"I don't understand," Robin said quietly, sniffing again and watching as the fox stalked closer to him

"Of course you don't, you humans never do," the fox explained, taking another few steps and placing his front paws on Robin's shaking legs

The fox leaned closer, flicking his tongue against the boy's face a few cautious times

"You taste like salt," he observed, licking his eye and making Robin squeal as the tickling sensation ran through him

"You've been crying, why have you been crying Human?"

"Don't call me that, my name is Robin," he exclaimed

"Robin? Like a bird? How odd to name one's young after another species," the fox mused, climbing up on the tree root next to Robin's head and staring at the boy

"Robin... what are you doing all the way out here? I didn't think humans came this far out."

"We don't, I ... I just got lost," Robin explained, finally starting to get used to the very strange forest and the even stranger fox

"Lost, how tragically sad, why don't you come with me? I can take you to your home,"

"No!" Robin cried, sniffing again

"I don't want to go home,"

"Why not?" the fox asked in confusion

"Because... because..."

And for a moment Robin was simply stuck on what he wanted to say

Because his mother seemed to not love him the way she used to anymore

Because the world wanted him to grow up when he wasn't ready to yet

Because there were too many things that other people thought were wrong with him

Because of all of it

"Because I don't fit anymore," he finally decided

The fox gave a slow nod of his head in apparent understanding

"I understand how you feel, if you don't want to go back to your home, won't you at least come to mine?"

Robin figured it couldn't hurt, it must be better than to stay out here cold and alone and lost, right?

So, wordlessly, he stood up and followed the fox away from the big tree and deeper and deeper into the woods

"What's your name?" he finally asked after a moment

"Human language cannot pronounce my name, my name is spoken in fox language, what would you like to call me in your language?"

Robin thought about that for a moment before taking a step closer and giving the fox a name

"Cedric," he decided

The fox nodded, seeming to accept the name

"Then Cedric I will be," he promised, leading Robin towards a small, cave like structure- a den he realized

"Don't foxes live in fox holes?" he asked in confusion

"I did, now I live with my brother, he can't fit inside a fox hole," Cedric

explained

Robin stared at him in confusion before turning back to the entrance of the den and gasping, suddenly realizing why Cedric's brother couldn't fit inside a fox hole

For what stood before him was a truly massive black wolf, at least twice Robin's size, and probably three times Cedric's

"This is my brother, you should give him a name too, one you can pronounce," Cedric said as he jumped towards the wolf

Robin watched as the wolf nuzzled against the fox's head and took a protective step over him to keep the smaller animal laying safely in the space between his belly and the ground

"Who are you?" boomed a voice that caused birds to fly from their homes

Any security Robin had once been feeling vanished and he froze, shaking once again

"This is Robin," Cedric supplemented

The wolf didn't bother to look down at his so-called brother, instead taking another step towards Robin and leaving Cedric unprotected at the mouth of the den

The wolf's breath was like a hot, humid gust of wind breathing down Robin's neck and his stare was so intense that it made the boy want to sob

"What are you doing out here little Robin-human-bird?" he asked

"I... I got lost," the boy finally said

"I don't want to go home," he added a moment later

"Why don't you want to go home?" the wolf prodded, seeming very displeased with this information

"I don't fit anymore," Robin explained, a few tears rolling down his

cheeks as his anxiety and fear and loneliness all finally caught up to him and he broke down in a sob

He fell to his knees and let out a trembling, ugly, broken sob as he just begged and pleaded for the world around him to stop turning- just for a moment, just one moment, just so he could catch his breath and not feel like everything was weighing down on him for once

The wolf seemed to take pity on him as he bent down and swept his huge pink tongue over Robin's face, knocking him backwards and causing him to stare up at the wolf in confusion as he did it again, licking up the tears that spilled from Robin's eyes and leaning his massive head down to nudge at the boy

"You don't have to say anything more," he said after a moment, nudging Robin again and opening his jaws

Robin let out a shriek of fear but was quickly calmed when he felt the teeth of the wolf wrap around the hood of his sweatshirt and not any part of his skin

The wolf held him up high off the ground, his head tilted back so that he could keep from dragging the boy as he walked back into the den

Cedric jumped in ahead of them and in a moment the den was lit with candlelight and no longer such a dark and scary place

The wolf set Robin down in the middle of the den, staring at him with clear concern for a moment before licking his face one more time for good measure

The wolf and Cedric looked at each other for a moment in some sort of silent conversation before the wolf meandered out of the den, leaving Cedric and Robin alone

"THAT'S your brother?" Robin asked in shock

"I know he's not very social but he tries," Cedric supplied, as if that were the only question Robin could possibly have

"But he's a wolf, and you're a fox, how does that even... happen?"

Cedric looked down at the ground, staying quiet for a long moment

"When I was a kit, humans came and took my family away, I never saw them again,"

Robin flinched, feeling a stab of empathy and a little bit of guilt puncture his heart

"My brother had it worse, he watched the humans murder his,"

Robin trembled, tears threatening to spill out of his eyes again as the horror of what had just been revealed to him played over and over again in his head like a non-ending reel of film

"We were both alone until we found each other, I would have been taken by the humans too if my brother hadn't come to my rescue, he and I have been the only family either of us have left ever since,"

Robin sniffed, rubbing at his eyes and trying desperately to clear them

"Why don't you hate humans then?" he asked in confusion

"It's unreasonable to blame every individual for the actions of a group," Cedric explained, laying down in front of Robin and stretching out his back legs

"There are wolves who have killed humans and foxes who have too, do you hate us?"

Robin shook his head, going quiet and looking up at the sound of footfall in the den once more

The wolf stood at the front, carrying a bundle of something or other in his teeth

"What do you have there?" Cedric asked, barely caring enough to raise his head

The wolf set the bundle down in front of Robin and stared down at it, as if waiting for it to magically do something

"Human bedding, we have a new friend, he needs to sleep comfortably,"

he explained

Upon closer inspection, Robin found that the bundle was indeed an expensive, thick sleeping bag and several comfortable looking blankets- even a pillow

"Where did you get these?" he asked with a frown

The wolf stared at the ceiling of the den, as if absolving him of any blame

"You took these from campers didn't you?"

"They had very big roaring moving things, they won't miss them, you need them, I will always take care of my family," he explained, nudging the bundle towards Robin again

There was a part of him that felt guilty and felt that he should take this back to the campers, but another part- a much stronger part- that didn't want to disappoint the wolf

So he unfurled the supplies and glanced up as he saw the wolf's tail wag in happiness, though his facial expression didn't seem to change

"Is it OK if I call you Milo?" he asked after a moment

The wolf stared at him for a moment before looking down at Cedric, who nodded enthusiastically to him

"You can call me Milo," he confirmed

Robin's lips twitched upwards and he nodded his approval, taking a breath as he wrapped one of the blankets around himself

Milo stepped closer, circling a few times before laying behind Robin and Cedric, his body warm and fluffy like a heated body pillow to lean up against

"Did the humans take your family too?" Cedric asked after a moment

Milo growled lowly, clearly upset that Cedric had the audacity to ask such a question

"Not... exactly, my mom... she's still there, but ... but I can't take it anymore! You don't understand what it's like! I'm still just a kid but they want me to grow up, I don't have any friends, and my mom is acting all different like she doesn't love me anymore, and school is... is a monster! And I can't take it anymore!" he finally exploded, sniffling and rubbing at his eyes again

Milo and Cedric exchanged silent looks before the fox stood up, taking a step closer and curling up in Robin's lap

"Humans are cruel," Milo rumbled from behind them

"But your mother will miss you if you stay with us," Cedric added

"No she won't, she doesn't care about me anymore, not like she used to,"

"Then there's no harm in going back to see her," Milo suggested

Robin stared down at his hands, narrowing his eyes

"Please don't, please don't make me go... I don't want to go back to that life anymore," he said quietly

"You won't," Cedric said quickly

"Why don't we just go back to your home, and if your mother missed you, you can stay with her, but we'll be right on the forest's edge, never out of reach," Milo suggested

"And if she really didn't miss you, we'll take as much human food as we can carry and come back here, you'll learn to hunt one day but I know it's hard for humans," Cedric added

Robin stuck his tongue out, the thought of hunting was absolutely appalling- especially with the thought of eating following it

It was, of all things, this thought that pushed him to agree to Cedric and Milo's deal

To Robin's slight surprise, his mother DID miss him, and when she saw him again she broke down in tears, running out and hugging him tightly,

so tightly that he couldn't breathe, tighter than she'd hugged him in years

And Robin broke down crying again

When he looked over his shoulder, he saw nothing, and realized sadly that the fox and the wolf had not kept their promise

They were a dream

An illusion

Imaginary

...

Or at least

That's what he thought at first...

A few days later however, he found out that was not the case

He was back at school, suffering through another day, when something truly horrible happened

He was outside, alone once again, minding his own business, when someone came up behind him and stole his bag of cheese crackers

"Hey! Give that back!" he shouted

The boy behind him just cackled, holding the bag out of Robin's reach and dangling it around

Robin jumped up a few times, trying to grab it, only for the bully to laugh harder

"Go on runt! Keep trying! Maybe I'll let you have one if you jump on one foot!" he laughed

Robin's lip trembled and the bully only laughed harder, reaching out and pushing him down

"Aww are you gonna cry about it?" he taunted

Robin closed his eyes tightly, but opened them again when a sudden

shadow eclipsed the sun

Opening his eyes, the boy looked up and saw a massive, muscular man looming behind the bully, with thick black hair and a full beard and hands easily as big as Robin's head

"Give. It. Back." He boomed, and Robin realized in utter shock that the voice he heard was the same as the wolf's

The bully turned around, dropping the snacks to the ground and shaking in place

"W-Who are you?"

Instead of answering, the man let out a wolfish snarl and bared his teeth, causing the other boy to shriek and run to the nearest teacher

"Are you OK Robin?" he heard, turning around quickly to see a man easily half of the wolfish man's size- or less- standing behind him

His hair was cinnamon brown with flecks of orange spilled in and he wore a gentle, easy smile, his body thin and lithe and fragile looking but also appearing rather agile and flexible

"Cedric?" he breathed

The man just smiled more, giving a knowing nod and reaching down to pick Robin up and set him on his feet again

There was a thick grunt from behind him and he turned, staring at the bigger man

"Milo!" he smiled

Milo smiled shyly, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a packet of beef jerky

"Hello little Robin-human-bird," he said sweetly, kneeling down and offering Robin the food

"Jerky?" he asked in confusion

"I told him to get you something vegetarian," Cedric pointed out

Milo grunted again, huffing lowly

"The boy can't live on leaves and grass, he isn't a rabbit," he grumbled

"Well he might be, you don't know him, you don't know his life, I mean just look at him!" Cedric exclaimed

Milo didn't answer, jerking his head up and staring across the schoolyard

Robin followed his gaze, seeing the bully from before running at full speed with a teacher in tow

But when he looked back to find his friends, the two were gone

This was not the only time he saw Milo and Cedric again

In fact, he saw them almost every day

Some days he ran far, far into woods, begging for someone to relieve him of these human pressures

Others he found them lurking around corners and standing behind walls, quick to get back on bullies and keep Robin from falling down stairs and even confront adults on their misbehaviors

There was one memorable time when Cedric overheard a teacher telling Robin that boys don't cry, he had pounced out from seemingly nowhere and chewed her ear off for as long as it took for her to get from the classroom to the principal's office about how wrong that was, and as "proof" he had even goaded big, strong, Milo to start sobbing- "Look at him! Look what you did! You made it cry!"- Robin heard being shouted from somewhere down the hall

Apparently they had pulled their vanishing act again that time, as they always did, given that the vice principal came in a few minutes later to declare a free day in the library due to not having a substitute teacher available

When Robin's class had gotten to the library, he found Cedric and Milo

doing a pretty poor job at hiding in the middle of the story circle, Cedric giving him an enthusiastic thumb's up and Milo laying in the rocking chair with a book over his face, apparently asleep

When he turned around a second time though, they were both gone, and the only thing that remained was an open book face down in the chair

It seemed that despite his earlier assumptions, Cedric and Milo HAD kept their promises

From that moment on, whenever Robin needed someone, his brothers were waiting for him, just on the forest's edge

And one day, after becoming an adult, they decided to show Robin how they had gained their powers to shape shift and appear or disappear at will

"The forest is alive," Cedric said as they walked down the path

"She grants us the power we need, and she recognizes you as a great ally, so she'll grant you power too," he added

Robin, now twenty-years-old and quite a bit larger than he had been ten years ago, marveled at the fact that the fox beside him hadn't changed at all since they first met

"Where are we going?" he asked

Even in his fox form Cedric seemed to smile

"To the moving mountains,"

That didn't really answer his question, but Robin trusted his brothers more than anyone or anything else in the world, and any last moment of anxiety dissipated when he looked up and saw who was waiting for him at the end of the trail

A massive black wolf, who stood upon seeing his brothers, and boomed his voice so loudly that even the birds in the trees flew away

"Hello, little Robin-human-bird,"

The Nymph Who Wore Her Feelings On Her Face

Once upon a time

In a land where fae folk roamed free

There lived a nymph named Kara

Kara was a very kind-hearted nymph, who always wanted the best for people

She always wanted to make people happy, and unfortunately, in order to accomplish this, she often swallowed her own feelings

She hated making people feel sad or upset and she knew that sometimes, if she admitted to feeling bad herself, it would bring others down with her

And that was the last thing she wanted...

So although she was always quick to listen when one of her friends- or even a stranger- had a problem or felt ill or just simply wasn't in a good mood, she found it almost impossible to confess to feeling out of sorts herself

Oftentimes people would ask "How are you?" and everytime she thought she was going to be honest and say she wasn't in a good mood she just... froze...

And before she knew it she she blurted out the best possible answer

"I'm fine", "I'm good", "I'm well", "I'm excellent" even if those words weren't true

It wasn't that she didn't trust her friends or that she didn't feel like she could be honest with them or go to them with her problems, she just didn't want to be a downer

Things were always better if she just stayed quiet and pretended to be OK, they moved on to lighter topics and happier things and her emotions almost always changed along with them

But she just saw no reason in making things worse by saying she was sick or felt sad or angry

What was the point in rehashing that she was upset with her magic screwing up again or having had a fight with her sister or that she felt guilty for not being able to help someone to the fullest extent?

It was better, she thought, to just keep it to herself

But unfortunately emotions don't work like that

Emotions have to be expressed, bottling them up will only make things worse in the long run, a lesson that Kara has learned time and time again each time she's bottled up her emotions in the past

But old habits die hard and she still couldn't bring herself to really admit when something was wrong

That is... until she found a different way to express her feelings

One day she was working with her garden, experimenting with a new growing technique, when she glanced up and saw a precession in process

Processions weren't entirely uncommon in the nymph community but they were a little on the odd side

Especially when Kara looked up and noticed that it wasn't a nymph procession at all, but one for elves

Elves mostly lived quite a ways away from nymph territory, not because they weren't friendly with each other but simply because they thrived in different environments

"What's going on?" she asked curiously as she looked up at the first elf who came her way

The elf looked down at her, smiling softly as she pulled her horse to a stop

"We're going to have a meeting with the trolls living just south of here, they've been having some issues spill onto our territory recently and it's time that comes to an end,"

Kara stared at her for a moment, tilting her head in confusion as she noticed the elf's face

"What are you wearing on your cheeks?"

"War paint," she explained, her fingers tracing over the intricate black designs as if by compulsion

"But I thought you were going to have a meeting? I didn't think that meant you were going to war,"

"We aren't going to war," the elf explained, dismounting her horse and taking a step closer to the nymph

"In our culture, we wear war paint whenever there's something at stake, something we need to be strong for, it doesn't mean war necessarily or even conflict, we wear war paint when we go into labor to have our children, we wear at weddings, at funerals, during tests and even when we're just feeling blue, each design is special and means something different to us, which is why they're so intricate, when we need strength, we paint these designs as a calling to our ancestors and the Gods and Goddesses to bless us with what we need, like... a beacon, or an offering, we wear this paint to ask for strength because we're afraid, and sometimes that in itself needs to be on display, there are patterns for everything, asking for bravery, or for healing, or for happiness, sometimes when people are sad or fearful or need help, they paint war paint on their faces to ask for it, and sometimes the strength they ask for doesn't have to come from an ancestor or a Goddess, sometimes it comes from a fellow elf who recognizes the pattern on their face and offers a helping hand, right now we need the trolls to understand and agree to what we're going to propose, so the markings on our faces are the Elven designs for understanding and peaceful resolutions."

"That's... amazing," Kara breathed, she had never heard of a more beautiful sounding tradition in her life...

What an incredible sounding thing, to wear your fears and insecurities on your face as a way of asking for help, but being strong at the same time

After all, only elves knew about this tradition from Kara's understanding, only elves knew what each pattern meant, to anyone and everyone else in the world the war paint looked like... well.... war paint...

It looked strong and mighty and superior, it looked graceful and beautiful and if Kara hadn't known the meaning behind it she would have seen it as a symbol of HAVING strength, not of asking for it

"Thank you," the elf said with a gentle smile, reaching into her pocket and presenting Kara with a simple, small, paint brush

"When you need strength, find your own symbols, and ask for it,"

With that she mounted her horse again and the procession went on, leaving Kara stunned and silent as she watched from her garden

She was more than a little amazed, and honestly... she was excited to try it out

Unfortunately, Kara soon discovered why elves were so appreciated as one of the most naturally artistic species

She would never in her life understand how she was supposed to control the paintbrush on her skin, no matter what she did, no matter what she painted, she couldn't seem to get anything to look the way she wanted it to

And so with a frustrated huff, she through the paint brush down and marched off to cool her head

She had all but forgotten about the entire thing by the time a few days had passed, but unfortunately, she hadn't completely forgotten, and when she came home from an extremely tiresome and stressing day, she

found herself at the familiar loss of not knowing what to do or how to feel better

She just felt so terrible, so empty, so powerless and weak.... she just wanted strength, some sort of strength to get through it all

She felt so alone and so helpless and it was killing her to feel like this, because she felt this way all the time and no matter what anyone did or said those feelings kept sneaking back in and it was... hopeless

She just felt so hopeless...

She was crying at this point, making her way into the bathroom to get some tissues for her eyes, when she spotted the paintbrush she had been trying to use a few days ago, still on the counter just where she had left it

Swallowing, she approached the brush and took a long, intense stare at it

She knew she would only get more frustrated if she picked it up, but the craving for the strength that the elf had spoken of was so deep and intense that her body was shaking with it

Swallowing, she reached into her makeup box and pulled out a pencil, staring at it for a moment before taking the cap off and leaning over the sink

Nymphs had always been a bit more progressive with their tools than other fae folk when it came to beauty and appearances, Kara was never more great full for that than she was now

With a deep breath, she positioned the pencil and licked her lips, wondering what she should draw

She decided that it might not be the best idea to experiment right now, so she went with something simple

"Sadness" was soon scribbled on one cheek, while *"Alone"* was scribbled on the other, she even drew a couple of rain clouds over them

And somehow... looking in the mirror and staring at herself with those honest words literally drawn on her skin....

It felt like a weight was being lifted, like she could somehow breathe again a little bit better than she had been before

She started feeling better after that, a little bit more collected as she carried out her day

And when it came time to wash it off and go to bed, well.... it sort of broke her heart...

But from then on Kara had found herself a new coping method

Whenever she felt sad or alone or angry or anything negative, she would take the makeup pencil and write her feelings on her face

Over the coming weeks writing her feelings started to evolve and she started to write what she wanted or needed instead

When she was sad she'd write "Smile!" and draw a happy face

When she was scared she'd write "Be brave!" and draw a little ghost

When she was angry she'd write "Calm down" and "Breathe" and make some attempt at a little rainbow

She even bought herself a big kit of makeup pencils in a huge range of colors so that she had some variety from the simple red

She never did the same design twice- or, almost never- and she had started having a really fun time with just coming up with different ways to express herself

One time when she was more upset than she had been in months she didn't even stop at her face, she started writing on her wrists, on her hands, up her arms... she covered herself in words of encouragement and pleas for help and when she looked in the mirror she found that she wasn't as repulsed by it as she thought she'd be

She found that she actually liked how it looked

Not because it was aesthetitically pleasing or what one would call "pretty", but because it meant something

Because she was wearing her heartache and her desperation and her encouragements on her body

Because she wasn't hiding anything anymore

Because she had ripped out every single thing that was hurting her- even the word "hurt" itself- and written it down, shown it to the light, so that it couldn't hide in the deepest, darkest corners of her mind anymore

It was a call out, of sorts

And it made her feel better

Unfortunately, this secret practice was about to come to an end

There was one morning when she was feeling quite down and felt like she really needed a laugh, so on one cheek she wrote *"Haha!* and on the other she simply put *"Joke Queen"*

She had even drawn a crown and a couple of little X's and O's

And she felt better

She looked in the mirror and she liked what she saw

Acknowledging that she needed a laugh to cheer her up somehow made a little bit of that depression go away in the first place, and to be honest, she was sort of proud of the writing itself

Writing on her own face hadn't been an easy talent to develop

In fact, in the beginning it was pretty horrendous, she was lucky if even she could read what she had written

But this? This looked pretty good...

She didn't have time to stare at it too long, however, before she heard the familiar ringing of a phone

Hurrying to answer it, she completely forgot about her recent face painting excursion, and when she found out that her sister had found some abandoned kittens and needed help caring for them, she didn't waste a second in heading out....

And completely forgetting to wash off the writing on her face

"Where are they?! Are they alright?!" Kara almost shouted as she burst into the cottage

The healer's cottage was somewhat small, but warm and homey and very very peaceful, it was no wonder that her sister had brought the kittens here

"They're fine, they're fine, the healer is looking at the last one now but she said they're all just a little hungry and tired, nothing to worry about," her sister said, lips pursed and worry painting her features

"Kara..." she said slowly

Unfortunately, she didn't have the chance to finish that sentence

The door to the healer's private office opened a moment later and both nymphs looked up to meet her eyes

"As I said before, there's nothing to worry about," she confirmed with a soft smile

The sisters let out simultaneous breaths of relief, clutching their chests almost identically as the healer walked closer

"Dear... what's that you have on your face?" she asked curiously

"What?" Kara asked in confusion

"You have some sort of ... writing? I think? On your face? Here, let me come closer and see,"

Kara's heart sank, face going pale with horror as she reached up and gently rubbed at her cheek

Sure enough, red make up came off on her fingertips, and she felt her world start to spiral out of control

How could she let this happen?

Her carelessness was going to cost her, she didn't know what the healer- and much less her sister- were going to have to say about this but it couldn't POSSIBLY be good

Nymphs were supposed to be beautiful, ethereal, and most of all, look natural

They were supposed to blend in with the world around them and sink into the backdrop of nature

That was supposed to be a large part of their beauty right there, but ... marking her face like this... uselessly scribbling on herself... she felt like a young child who had taken scissors to her hair and regretted it the moment she looked in the mirror....

"What a cute idea!" the healer cried, causing Kara to snap back to reality

"I like it, it's very bold, very unique," she continued on

And Kara was... surprised

More than a little surprised as a matter of fact

But the healer seemed happy with it still...

"Hey, what do you call a pile of kittens?" her sister asked

Kara blinked in confusion and shrugged

"A meowtain,"

For the first time in what felt like ages, a smile- a really true, genuine smile-broke out across Kara's face, and she started to laugh

"What do you call an alligator in a vest?" the healer began

"An investigator,"

That only made Kara laugh more, and before she knew it all three of them were trading jokes and laughs, having a grand time with each other

And Kara.... she hadn't felt this happy in the longest time....

She went home that night with cheeks aching from laughter, feeling happy and content, and when she went to wipe away the makeup, she gave it a fond smile... but didn't feel so bad

The next time she wore the makeup out again she had gone to pick up some books from the local book keeper and, once more, had forgotten to take off the makeup

This time she had been feeling rather depressed, having just found out that a friend of her's was moving away, so she wrote *"Heavy heart"* on one cheek, and, because she had been crying all morning, *"Crybaby"* on the other

When she got to the book keeper he took a bit of a more indirect approach to letting her know about her face than the healer had, moving away from the counter and grabbing a marker

He had his back to Kara, fiddling around with the marker for some time before turning around and presenting the backs of his palms to her

On one it had "Cry on!" written, the other had a simple smiley face

And when he turned his palms over, it read "Cry, it'll be OK"

And so, for the first time in years, Kara began to cry in front of someone else

She cried and her tears smudged and messed with the writing on her face, but she didn't care

It felt good to have someone there with her, to hold her hand and rub her back as she broke down

It felt good to have someone listen, to offer support and remind her that there's nothing wrong with crying, and that sometimes it feels good to cry

Crying is a release of toxins from the body, it's as natural as sweating or sneezing

And of course it feels good after, even if it's a little rotten during

But it felt good to talk to him, to express how much she would miss her friend and how worried she would be that despite her best efforts the might not stay in touch

It felt so good that when she got home and found that the makeup had been washed and rubbed away, she, strangely, didn't feel bad at all about it, and she was able to look in the mirror and somehow feel... peaceful, not feeling quite as bad about the move as she had before

It was after that that Kara started to write on her face every day

Sometimes it was her emotions- "Scaredy cat" one day when she was afraid, "Worrywart" another when she was anxious (And she felt a strange comfort in reclaiming words that had been used to insult her in the past, wearing them on her skin, just like wearing emotions, had the power to make them her own, to no longer give THEM the power to hurt her by digging at her darkest moments if she put them in the light now)

Other times it was what she needed- "Smile!" for when she needed a smile or "Be brave!" for when she needed courage

And yet other times still it had really nothing to do with her state of mind, sometimes it was just random things

It was the beginning of spring so she drew a flower on one cheek and wrote "Spring has sprung!" across the other

One day she had just finished an especially good book and wrote the main character's name on one cheek and her favorite quote on the other

It was an array of things, an arrangement of things, and sometimes they were very positive, encouraging things that she could never look in the mirror and say to herself

Things like "I'm beautiful" and "I'm happy"

Because with her war paint on, she didn't feel as dark or negative or fearful as she did before

She felt braver, stronger, and yes, even more beautiful

And the strangest part of it all was how people seemed to be responding

They always looked forward to seeing what Kara had written that day and when they found that she wasn't feeling quite well they were always quite quick to try to comfort her or help cheer her up in any way that she could

She still couldn't quite bring herself to say she was upset when people asked how she was- still saying "I'm good" even when storm clouds were painted on her face- but it was a little easier for people to find out what she really meant when they saw the writing on her skin

Of course there were people out there who liked to be negative and mean about everything, who had nothing but artificial happiness in their lives. who criticized her face painting

And that was OK, because she didn't take anything they said to heart

And when she did, she simply went home and wrote a new message across her cheeks

Something kind and encouraging and the exact opposite of what the bullies might say or had said

And honestly... it was working

She felt happier and calmer and everything.... everything felt right...

It was a few months after that that she was working in her garden again, fixing up a rose bush when she looked up and saw the procession of elves again

"Hey!" she called eagerly, waving to the first one, who stopped her horse a bit suddenly and looked down, smiling from ear to ear as she stared at the other

"I see you're wearing your war paint,"

"I see you aren't?"

"I don't need to today, we're just going to a nice, relaxing picnic," the elf explained

Kara smiled slightly, looking down and nodding

"Well um, I wanted to thank you! You inspired me to do this war paint thing and.... and it feels good, God it IS good... you made me feel so at peace and hopeful again, I really needed that, more than you know,"

The elf smiled down at her, a warm look on her face as she gave a slow nod and reached into her pocket, grabbing a paint brush and a small container of paint before scribbling something on her face and turning back to face the other

"Hi" read one cheek

"I'm Lana"

Kara grinned eagerly, grabbing a makeup pencil from her purse and scribbling on her own skin

"Hi Lana!" one cheek read

"I'm Kara"

The Origins Of Valentine

Once upon a time

An anciently long time ago

There lived a werewolf named Cayden

Cayden was a kind, gentle soul, who wanted nothing more in the entire world than to fall in love and have a family

One day, in his twenty-third year of life, he got his wish

Well...

Half of his wish

For one day in his twenty-third year of life, Cayden met a girl named Valeria

He and Valeria fell in love instantly, for they were meant to be. written in the stars, soulmates

In the werewolf community it's believed that everyone has a True Mate out there, whether or not this person is also their soulmate depends on the pair in question, but in those beautifully rare cases, the stars align, and the person you're destined to fall in love with is also your soulmate

For soulmates are not explicitly romantic pairs

They are twin souls

Souls born of the same spark of life, a perfect match, the same fingerprint, destined to be there for each other, to love each other, to exist for each other, when no one and nothing else will

Soulmates come in many forms

In friends

In siblings

In parents and their children

Even sometimes in strangers, a ghost of a smile that you see on the street that lights up your entire world though you never figure out why

And yes, in romantic partners

And in this beautiful occasion, Cayden and Valeria were meant to be

Lovers

True mates

Soulmates

Theirs was a story told like a fairytale among the wolves, for Cayden was a very strong, popular Alpha with a large pack and an even larger territory, waiting for him to find his mate had been much like a king waiting to find a bride

Only for werewolves, it was something so much more significant than any marriage could ever be

The bond between mates is lifelong, everlasting, a type of love that beats steady, hearts beating as one, together, in eternal unison for as long as they both shall live

Mates symbolize life

The truest ESSENCE of life

Mates love each other unconditionally and trust each other without a shadow of a doubt, they're there in the roughest patches and on the stormiest days

Your mate stands by you in everything you do and every decision you make, and if it's a bad decision, they change your mind

It isn't questioned, it isn't argued, it just simply IS

For an Alpha to find his mate means that the pack will be complete, no longer ruled with only one hand, now to be supported by two

It means the everlasting blessings of prosperity and children and a bloodline of succession that will keep Cayden's strong Alpha heart beating for centuries to come, even long after his own time has passed

And the wolves LOVED Valeria

She was springtime and joy, light and laughter and beauty, with hair like sunshine and eyes the clearest color of amber any of them had ever seen

She was not just a mate, or just a bride, or just a queen

She was a mother to all wolves, a gentle voice and a guiding hand and loving light that took even the most broken souls under her wing to show them compassion and love, not to fix, but to heal

When Cayden found Valeria, it was as if the entire pack had found a gift from the Goddess herself

No one imagined that such a gift would last for less than a year's time

For one day in mid-winter, Valeria's heart stopped beating

This kind, gentle soul had been taken from the world when she was in a nearby town collecting fabric to have made into a wedding dress

No one knows exactly what happened, for the wolves who found her first refused to tell, claiming that what they saw was too gruesome to stain upon anyone else's minds

The only thing known for sure is that she had been attacked by human men, and that somehow they had overpowered her, even when she turned into a wolf

The bond between mated wolves is a curious thing

For they can feel each other's life energy with them from the moment they meet until the moment they leave this world

It's like a second heartbeat, humming somewhere in the distance of their souls, an extra color in their aura, an extra spark of energy flowing through their veins

And when Valeria's heart stopped beating, so did that thrum of energy that had been singing in Cayden's soul for just short of a year

When he felt that energy stop, according to legend, he screamed with so much agony that every wolf in the entire realm, even those not belonging to his pack, felt a shot of pain flitter through their hearts

He mourned with such powerful grief that even the wolves in the area who couldn't become human mourned along with him

The pack was devastated, and sympathies came from surrounding packs in numbers like never before

Some guessed that the sympathies were half out of respect for Cayden, and half out of their own mourning for having known Valeria, even if it had been only for the briefest moment in time

From that day forth, the only person who saw Cayden was his sister, and even that was scarce

His sister told the pack that he was unfit to be out of his home as of yet, but she never told them just how badly he grieved

How his sobs racked his body so hard each night that she could feel the vibrations in the floor from rooms way

How his voice had been lost so many times that she had forgotten what it sounded like

How he spoke to the spirit of his dead mate each night and asked her to return

How she heard him pray to the Moon each night to bring back his beloved

How he offered a trade of anything she would take, as much of his life as she wanted, to bring back his stolen bride-to-be

His sister never told another soul of the moment that her heart truly and utterly shattered when she heard him whisper to the moon one night "I never even saw her wedding dress"

Cayden's mourning continued for six weeks, and the longer it went on, the more sick with grief the other wolves became, for they feared that they would lose not just their Luna, but their Alpha, within the same winter

It's far from uncommon for werewolves to die of grief, to follow their mates into the next realm, but with no children of his own, and not even another wolf chosen to take his place in case he dies without an heir, his pack could not bear to lose him yet

It was on the full moon six weeks after the death of their Alpha's mate that Cayden's pack came to a decision

They couldn't lose him too, and they had fallen to pieces without the love and light Valeria had shown them

And so on the full moon, each and every wolf in the pack bowed to the Moon and begged her to send Valeria's soul back to them

They howled their pleas to the Moon, offering to sacrifice pieces of their hearts, to shorten their lives, if she would grant them their request

And the Moon, being a very powerful spirit herself, felt a pang of agony at listening to them plead

Cayden's constant grieving and begging for her to send his beloved back to him had already hurt her heart every night for the past six weeks, but with the entire pack asking her for this with so much sincerity and so much desperation in their souls, she could no longer refuse

You see, the wolves and werewolves were the first creatures to worship the Moon, to pray to her and sing her songs at night

And as her first children, they were her favorites

Seeing so many of her most beloved children in such deep pain caused her pain as well, enough that when she faded out of the night sky, in the time between moonset and sunrise, she asked the Sun for his help

The Sun and Moon are old lovers, as old as this planet herself, but their time together is understandably limited, and the Sun knew that for the Moon to use their time to ask him of a favor, she must surely need it

And so the Sun gave her his power, and the Moon asked the Stars the next night for their power too

And once she had the power of the celestial universe, she traveled into Heaven to find Valeria, and ask her to return to Earth

"I cannot," Valeria said

"I cannot, for it would take me twenty years to be reborn the way I was before, to be Cayden's mate again, and he cannot wait all that time, nor can my pack, it's better if they mourn me and move on, they cannot wait another twenty years,"

She was right, the pack wouldn't survive twenty years without her and Cayden wouldn't survive even another twenty days

And so the Moon proposed a new idea

"What if you could be reborn as you are now? What if you could maintain your memories, your age, your wisdom, and not have to start over again and wait twenty years?"

"If I could be reborn as I am now, then I wouldn't hesitate to return to my pack, to my Alpha, to my Cayden," Valeria promised

And so the Moon decided that this was what she must do to heal the shattered hearts of her children

She had only one night's worth of power to stay in Heaven, and she made sure to make use of it

She spoke to as many souls as she could, and finally she was lead to an angel named Cupid

Not THE Cupid, the Roman God of Love, but simply an angel named after him

This Cupid was not involved in love affairs at all, just the opposite in fact, this Cupid was an Angel of Death

His job was to greet departed souls near the Light and lead them home to Heaven

And when the Moon told Cupid her story, he found himself wanting to cry at the tragedy and pain that had been brought upon so many people

"I don't know what you want from me though, I cannot restore her body, it's been far too long," he said as gently as he could

"Not her body, another, surely there is another soul about to leave Earth, please, let her have the spare body, I'll heal it myself, please,"

Cupid was hesitant, for such a thing sounded as if it should go against the laws of Nature (although the Moon and Nature were rather close friends, surely she wouldn't do anything too upsetting to her friend)

"There is one soul," he began

"I could take you there, and if this soul still wishes to depart from Earth, your wolf can have the body, though I must warn you, the body is human,"

"I can fix that," the Moon said assuringly, she never did transformations herself, it went against her very laws, but everything about this case was so extraordinary and unusual that she wasn't going to let that stop her

And so the Moon, Cupid, and Valeria traveled to Earth, to seek the soul who may unknowingly be their salvation

"Hayden, it's time to go," Cupid said

The soul turned to the group, looking down anxiously

"You don't have to," the Moon said softly

"These are.... special circumstances... if you wish to stay, you can stay,"

Hayden turned around, staring down at the body on the floor of the house and looking back up at Cupid

"I... want to see my mother and sister... are they there?"

"Of course," Cupid confirmed quietly

Hayden nodded slowly, reaching out shyly and taking Cupid's hand

The angel then handed an orb to the Moon

The orb was energy- life energy, and could be used to revive a body when a soul was truly not ready to go yet

The moon watched Hayden and Cupid leave before placing the orb inside the body's chest, watching it gleam and glow with renewed life

She then gave Valeria a nod of confirmation, a nod telling her that it was up to her now to continue, and returned to the sky, where she told the wolves that the soul they had so loved would return to them, and told them where to find her

For the first time in six weeks Cayden left his home, his pack following anxiously behind them as they took the journey back to the very town where Valeria's life had been taken in the first place

The pack waited outside as Cayden entered the empty house, his heart pounding as he stepped closer to the body in the center of the floor, sitting down next to it, he reached out and carefully took the surprisingly warm hand in his, giving it a small squeeze

"Come back to me," he breathed, closing his eyes

"Please... please come back to me my love..."

Suddenly, the most amazing sound filled the air

The sound of a gasp, the first breath of life, filling air into the lungs of his mate's new body as his eyes opened and he stared down, waiting as a set of eyes- just as beautifully amber as the old- opened and took him in as their first sight

"Cayden," Valeria smiled, sitting up slowly and wrapping his arms around Cayden's neck

Though the voice was different, and the body was nearly completely opposite from what Valeria's had been before, he could still tell that at the core, it was her soul filling out the flesh and bones in his arms

And the knowledge that he finally had his mate back in his arms broke him down into a sob again- but this one of gratitude, of relief, of everlasting love, as he held him in his arms

"Valeria," he breathed back, burying his face in his neck and inhaling the new scent

It was vastly different than the first, more like oak than flowers, more like ground than sky and more ocean water than clean river water, but there were other parts that were the same, sugar and honey and the faintest aroma of wolf blood starting to travel through the previously human's veins

"I don't think that should be my name anymore," he said quietly, pulling back and tapping his head against Cayden's

"I died before, I think Valeria should die with that old life, this is a new beginning, a new life, I should have a new name."

Cayden gently cupped his mate's face in his hand, stroking his thumb over the skin of his cheek and marveling at how soft it was, just as Valeria's had been

"Valentine," he said softly

And for the first time in nearly two months, he saw his mate smile, and he could feel that familiar thrum of energy beating alongside his heart stronger than ever "Valentine," he repeated with an air of bliss upon his voice

"I like that, different, but still me,"

"Just like you are now," Cayden confirmed, squeezing Valentine's hand and pressing a kiss to his lips, a rush of amazement and energy and bliss and Heaven and love rushing through his veins just as it had the first

time he had kissed Valeria, it was the confirmation of a mate, the confirmation of true love, of soulmates meeting once again in a new life

"I love you so much, my Valentine,"

And so it was decided that each year on this day the werewolves would tell the story of Cayden and Valentine

Of a love so strong that it moved the Sun and the Moon and the Heavens above to tears until the very celestial forces worked together to bring them back to each other

The day is celebrated with flowers and chocolate- Valentine's and Cayden's favorite things respectively- and promises of true love

When asking someone "Will you be my Valentine?" one is asking if they would stay with them, fall into true love with them, and travel through Heaven and come back to Earth for them

One is asking if they have permission to love their Valentine as much as Cayden loved his, enough to move the very Sun and Moon and Stars, to bring angels to tears and change the laws of Heaven to be reunited again

The wolves celebrated this day each year with increasing passion, even eternities later when Cayden and Valentine's descendants still ruled the pack in the name of their ancestors and how in love they were

Even now when the story is so old that most of the detail is forgotten, there still lives a bloodline of Alpha werewolves, who believe- and who's packs believe- that they are descended from the great Cayden and Valentine, they hold so fast to their ancestors in fact, that all wolves born to this bloodline marry their mates on the anniversary of Cayden and Valentine's meeting

And each time a new pair is mated, it gives even more incentive for the wolves to continue their anciently old celebration

This celebration was envied by other species, and so they began to copy it, spreading through to vampire communities, into the faery world, even

all the way into the ocean where merfolk resided, and finally spreading to humans

This day when we remember a love so true and so pure, that brought forth the strongest, longest living werewolf pack in history, filled with happiness and children and unity, a love that moved the entire universe to be together again

This day is the day when the lovers were reunited to begin their journey together, February 14th

Better known as: Valentine's Day

The Princess Of Bookdale

Once upon a time

In a land called Bookdale

There lived a princess named Rebecca

Rebecca was an incredibly kind princess, who lived with her family and her pet dragon Max

Rebecca's family ruled over the kingdom of Bookdale with kindness and helpfulness, for Bookdale was - as the name might describe- a kingdom of books

Well, not in the way that books were their subjects, the kingdom was MADE of books

Every castle wall was constructed with care and consisted of all kinds of books from every language, genre, and author you could imagine

The people in Bookdale were always quite happy, after all they never ran out of things to read, and if they should ever be looking for something specific that they just couldn't find, they could always go to the king, Jamie, for help

Jamie was a wizard after all, he could summon any book at any time, even if it was part of the building- it was never very hard to have the book-bricks replaced you see

King Jamie and Queen Desiree were likely the most well-loved monarchy in the land, but no one was more well loved than their daughters, Princess Rebecca and Princess Emma

Princess Emma was the newest edition to the family and although she hadn't developed her own special talent just yet, people were always enamored with her

Her beauty and bright laughter never failed to make people smile

But Princess Rebecca was something else entirely

She not only possessed the same beauty that seemed to run in her family, but she was also quite talented

People came from all over to take a chance in getting one of Rebecca's drawings, for she was a brilliant artist

Perhaps even more popular than her drawings were her colorings, for they were always vibrant and spectacular

Incidentally, this is how she ended up with the family's new pet dragon Max

A young faery woman happened to be visiting the king to pick up an order of books when her daughter spotted Rebecca's drawings

Of course, she cried out, that she simply HAD to have one

And Rebecca quite willingly drew something for her

She drew a beautiful purple dragon- her dream pet

She seemed to have the dragon on the brain lately, given that it was nearly Christmas and she knew that if she wished very, very hard, Santa might just bring her one

It was a bit of a long-shot of course, Santa bringing pets was a difficult thing that only happened once in a while, given that they were living, breathing creatures and not toys to be manufactured in his shop

But regardless, it did happen sometimes

"What do you wish for most Rebecca?" King Jamie asked on Christmas Eve, as he was tucking Rebecca into bed

"A dragon," she replied with a bright smile

"Of course," the king chuckled, kissing her goodnight and heading out of her room

That night she dreamed of the idea of a pet dragon

She had drawn pictures of it all over her room just days before

And when she woke up on Christmas morning, she shot out of bed like a lightening bolt and raced down the stairs, hoping to see a dragon sitting under the tree

And honestly, she couldn't quite hide the disappointment she found when she saw nothing but wrapped up boxes and colorful bags

"You know, I think there's one more present upstairs, why doesn't Daddy go get it before we start opening these?" Queen Desiree suggested, winking at the king and patting Rebecca's head

"You know what? I think you're right," Jamie replied with a smile, dashing up the staircase made of books with a smile on his face

"Why would there be one upstairs?" Rebecca asked in confusion

"Sometimes Santa has too many cookies and forgets where the tree is," her grandfather answered immediately

He always seemed to have an answer for these things and she wondered sometimes if he had spent time in Santa's shop

She couldn't quite imagine him as an elf but perhaps he groomed reindeer or something...

"Here it is! You were right, Santa missed the tree with this one," Jamie announced as he brought down a large box with a huge bow on top

"He must have had one of the elves deliver that one," Desiree suggested

"It looks like it's for you," Jamie added, setting the box down in front of Rebecca

Oddly, the princess noticed, this box was not fully wrapped like the others

It was wrapped, but the lid wasn't attached, just barely sitting on top as if it were an invitation to be opened

"Can I?" she beamed up excitedly

Her parents nodded, and immediately she took the lid off of the box, revealing a beautiful baby dragon sitting inside

She gasped in excitement, reaching out and picking up the tiny reptile

The dragon was purple and sported a bright red bow around his neck and chirped with happiness the moment Rebecca took him out of the box

"What are you going to name him Rebecca?" Jamie asked curiously

"Hm... I'm not sure yet..." the princess replied, setting the dragon down to wander around freely

"Just hope he doesn't eat the tree," her grandfather commented worriedly, seeing that the thus so far unnamed dragon was sniffing rather suspiciously at a low hanging ornament

"You and me both Dad..." Jamie sighed

Perhaps the dragon should have waited until last, when more attention could be paid to keeping him away from the valuables...

It wasn't so much that they were worried the dragon would eat or destroy the ornaments, but dragons were known for their hoards, the king was beginning to wonder if he would walk down one day and find the new pet sitting atop a giant mountain of Christmas decorations that he had decided to claim as his own...

"Please let this one collect something ridiculous like pencils..." he muttered to himself

He wasn't really THRILLED at the idea of having giant collections of pencils all over the castle but it was a lot better than finding his valuables stacked up in all corners...

"Look Daddy!" Rebecca laughed, drawing the king's attention away from the potential flaws in his "Give my daughter a pet dragon" plan

There in the corner was in fact the aforementioned dragon, rolling around with wrapping paper on his head

Because of course

"They look like reindeer antlers!"

"Yeah they do," Jamie laughed

"I know what I'm going to name him now," Rebecca said with determination

"Really? What is it?"

"Max!"

The king and queen stared at each other in confusion, not quite getting how wrapping paper reindeer antlers translated to naming the dragon Max

"Um... why?" the queen asked curiously

"It just feels right," Rebecca replied definitely

And so it was that the dragon was named Max

Max was Rebecca's best friend and always sat loyally by her side whenever she drew or colored something for the people of Bookdale

And incidentally, Max didn't hoard pencils at all

He hoarded measuring cups

The Quest For Good Advice

Once upon a time

In a land full of heroes and villains

There lived a hero by the name of Star Girl

Well, that wasn't her real name, her real name was Quinn

And Quinn found that there was a very interesting conflict about being a hero

Namely, what do you do when there's a problem you can't solve with superpowers?

It wasn't really that Quinn had been Star Girl her entire life.... but she had always had her powers

She was born on earth, but her parents were both from another planet- Belrrra`an- and she had been raised learning how to use her Belrrra`anian powers just like most kids were raised learning how to read and write, it was just part of her, and she had become Star Girl at a very young age

So in short, Quinn was very used to solving her problems with super strength, extra speed, or magic healing powers

(Not to mention the variety in between)

So what do you do when you come across a problem- a really BIG problem- that can't be solved with superpowers?

Namely, what do you do when you want to save someone who doesn't want to be saved?

It all started when Quinn was about nineteen and she made her first friend in the new town she had moved to

Quinn wasn't great at maintaining friendships, through no real fault of her own, but people grew and changed and moved on- or moved away- and so far she had just never met anyone that really.... stuck....

That is, until she met Ruby

Ruby wasn't a normal human, completely average with no superpowers and no real desire to have them, which Quinn thought was a little odd but not really uncommon she supposed

Ruby was also kind, brave, wickedly witty, and loved many of the same things that Quinn loved, and they became very fast friends

But not everything was completely sunshine and rainbows, because Ruby was.... well....

Pessimistic

Which wasn't in itself a bad thing necessarily, just... something that Quinn didn't know how to deal with

Belrrra`anians are natural optimists, it's literally in their DNA, and whenever Ruby complains about something, all Quinn wants to do is fix it and make it better

Though... that was a little hard to do when everything she suggested was turned down

It didn't seem to matter what the occasion or case, whenever Ruby had a problem- even the slightest, tiniest of problems- and Quinn tried to help her, all of her ideas were promptly rejected

And unfortunately, these problems- like fighting with a co-worker, her car needing a new part, or her hair not growing as long as she wanted to, for example- were all things that superpowers were really quite useless towards

She couldn't force Ruby to get along with her co-worker

She couldn't race or fly towards the mechanic and magically come up with a new part that didn't require payment

And no amount of magical Belrrra'anian healing was going to make Ruby's hair grow

So it was quite distressing when Ruby never took her advice, it left her wondering if maybe her advice was just always ... bad...

Really... really... REALLY bad....

Which is what prompted her to get a second opinion- namely, her mother's

"I don't think your advice is bad," her mother began as she set a plate of freshly baked cookies on the table

"Then why doesn't Ruby ever want to take it?" Quinn asked in distress

"Well Sugar. I've come to find that humans are a very strange species. they can't always seem to get out of their own way, do you know what I mean?"

Quinn thought about that for a moment, narrowing her eyes and slowly shaking her head

"I really don't,"

"Well let me put it this way, imagine that life is a runaway bus, and a human is standing in front of that bus, now the human has the choice to move to the left, move to the right, or just keep standing where it's standing and let the bus run them over. some humans go left. some humans go right, and some humans just... keep on standin' there until the bus hits them, and then they wonder WHY the bus hit them and worse, sometimes they wonder why no one warned them that the bus was coming,"

Quinn pursed her lips, wrinkling her nose in distaste

"I... still don't understand,"

Her mother thought about that for a long moment, finally snapping her fingers as she started again

"Let me put it this way, imagine that life is a runaway train,"

Needless to say, Quinn didn't get the answer she was looking for from her mother

So she decided to seek advice from an unbiased third party instead, namely, a therapist

"So tell me Quinn, why is it you're here?"

"Well... I have this friend, and she has a lot of problems, and everytime I make a suggestion to her or try to give her advice she rejects it, I don't know if I'm just giving really bad advice or what, but it's making me feel like a bad friend that I can't help her,"

"I see... and why is it that you believe it's your responsibility to take on your friend's problems yourself?"

"Because... we're friends...? Isn't that what friends do?"

"Perhaps, but if you're always offering solutions that she's never accepting don't you think there might be a deeper reason why you keep offering?"

Quinn thought about that for a moment, biting her lip

"Well... I want to help people,"

"And why is that?"

"It's... in my nature?"

"And what nature would that be?"

It was then that Quinn had a very important thought occur to her: Secret identities are probably why superheroes don't tend to use therapists.....

True, she could always just come in her true form, with her pink skin, white hair, and blue freckles, and in her superhero costume of course

But something about that just told Quinn it didn't seem like a good idea...

So she decided that maybe she was going about this the wrong way, maybe instead of trying to solve this problem as Quinn she should be trying to solve it as Star Girl

Which is why she ended up seeking out her best friend in the superhero career- Captain Fox, an earthling who was engineered from birth to have all the powers of a fox (and more!)

"I don't think you're giving bad advice," Captain Fox said with a shrug, taking a sip of his coffee

"I mean, it isn't necessarily GOOD advice, but it isn't necessarily BAD either," he added a second later

Quinn frowned, wrinkling her nose

"So.... what kind of advice would you recommend?"

"Well what's the problem she's going through now?" he asked

"She needs a new part for her car and can't find a cheap enough mechanic to take care of it for her since the part is old and hard to come by,"

Captain Fox nodded slowly, squinting as if he was really thinking things through

"So.... she got hit by a car?"

"What? No, no that isn't what I said at all, I said she needs a PART for her car,"

"Ahhhh... someone took apart her car,"

"Wah- ... no, no no, she NEEDS, a PART, FOR her car,"

Captain Fox was quiet for a moment, wincing as he tried again

"She... turned into a car and-"

"NO. She NEEDS. a PART. FOR. HER. CAR."

"..... Someone hit her with part of her car.....?"

Quinn just hung her head and dismissed him, truthfully it wasn't worth the agony, she had forgotten that Captain Fox only seemed to deal with superhero related problems...

"You know," she heard, glancing up at Captain Fox's sidekick- Fox Boy- as he sucked down a spoon full of frozen yogurt

"If I were you and I REALLY wanted to help, I'd just go around town to all the different mechanics offering my autograph until one of them chippered up and offered you the part for free, you know, use your celebrity? But I'm just a sidekick with you so what do I know?"

Quinn thought about that for a moment, leaning back as she watched the fox boys leave and considering that option

It wasn't a terrible idea....

"Alright, nobody move!!" she heard, glancing up and seeing her arch nemesis Dr. Trouble holding up the coffee shop with what looked like some kind of radioactive gun

This was a job for... STAR GIRL!!!

...

Too bad Star Girl really wasn't feeling it at the moment

"Can we do this some other time *Doctor*? I'm REALLY not in the mood," she said with a heavy sigh, though she got up from the table and trudged her way towards the super villain anyway

She couldn't just sit still and let a coffee shop get held up after all, no matter how upset she felt

"Well now is a fine time to tell me since I'm already here," Dr. Trouble huffed, leaning a little closer so that only Star Girl could hear her

"Listen, could you just.... go along for half an hour? My mother-in-law is in town and on my back about how I'm not bad enough for her son and frankly I've had it up to here and need to work off some aggression,"

Quinn rolled her eyes, sighing loudly and giving a solemn nod

"Fine.... let's take it outside," she grumbled, grabbing a croissant off the counter and making a mental note to come back and pay for it later

Fun fact: Belrrra`anians are virtually useless when they have low blood sugar

Dr. Trouble lowered her gun, staring at Quinn with a frown

"And what happened to YOU today Princess? Did your pony trip over your giant mountain of self-righteous awards and scrape a hoof or something?"

"It's personal, and Buttercup is FINE thanks for asking,"

Dr. Trouble was quiet for a moment, eye twitching in disgust

"I was being sarcastic- wait you have an ACTUAL pony? Oh my GOD what kind of privileged alien nonsense is this!?"

"Excuse you I bought that pony MYSELF using my own hard earned money- which I had to work in RETAIL for so I think I earned- .... why am I even talking about this to you? Are we going outside or not?"

Dr. Trouble frowned a little, but followed her out anyway

The thing about being arch nemeses (nemesis?) was that you got to know each other pretty well, whether you necessarily wanted to or not, and Dr. Trouble knew that this wasn't the same Star Girl she had pledged her life to fight against

"OK, point me in the direction of your mother-in-law so we can make this good," Quinn grumbled as she flew up and landed on the roof of the coffee shop, knowing that Dr. Trouble was levitating right behind her

"Forget about her right now, I want to talk to you girl to girl alright? Forget our little... minor disagreements about the law-"

"You curb-stomped the district attorney because he spilled coffee on you, that's more than a minor disagreement,"

"- and the slightly frosty history our families have together-"

"Your husband punched my brother in the nose and smashed a museum painting over his head because he 'didn't like his face',"

"-you and I have our own history together-"

"A history that includes you trying to throw me into a plane propeller and almost dying my hair green for a month,"

"-and I know something is wrong with you, so let's talk, girl to girl, Quinn to Lisa, why are you in such a stormy mood?"

For as many things as Dr. Trouble had done.... she did have a point

Heroes and villains may rarely ever see eye to eye but there was a special bond, something almost akin to a caring relationship (if you really stretch the word "caring" and put in a very heavy dose of "almost") between a hero and their arch nemesis

And really, what could be the harm in telling her?

So Quinn sat down on the edge of the roof, brushing her hair behind her ear and sighing loudly

"I think I give bad advice,"

"What makes you say that? I mean, sure, from a villainy perspective you give TERRIBLE advice, but I think you do pretty well for a goody goody,"

Quinn shook her head, bringing her legs up to her chest and sighing loudly

"I have this... friend... and she has so many problems and I keep trying to help her but she rejects every single piece of advice I ever offer.... am I a bad friend for not being able to help?"

Dr. Trouble- Lisa- sat down next to her, putting a hand gently on her back and shaking her head

"You aren't a bad friend and you don't necessarily give bad advice just because someone doesn't want to take it, there are all kinds of reasons why someone doesn't take your advice, maybe they just wanted to vent but weren't actually looking for a solution, maybe they wanted to come up with something themselves, or maybe they just aren't ready to solve whatever problem they're having, people get like that sometimes, where they're just not ... READY to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I mean look at me for example, do you think that no one ever tried to advise me against becoming a super villain? They did, and I didn't take their advice, not because it was bad advice, but because I just wasn't ready to accept it- or, maybe better put, I didn't WANT to accept it."

"But why wouldn't she want to accept advice about getting her car fixed?"

"Who knows? Why don't I want to stop being a bad guy? People do weird things Quinn, they think in different ways, and sometimes they just don't do what's healthy or right or good, and sometimes when they complain it isn't to get advice, it's just to vent, and if that makes you uncomfortable then you should say something, or try to brush it off and move on, you can't absorb everyone else's problems- which, I know, is like trying to tell dog not to chase after a Frisbee but at least TRY to understand here, there's such a thing as helping from arm's length so that you can protect your OWN health and well-being, versus taking every single thing personally and making THEIR problems YOUR problems, the former is being a good friend, the latter is destroying yourself, and for the record, no, not being able to help someone doesn't make you a bad friend, it just makes you.... normal, no one can help everyone, not even a superhero, especially considering that there are people out there who just don't want to be helped,"

Quinn nodded slowly, biting her lip

"But.... if I just ignored everyone who didn't want to be helped then they could get hurt, I met this guy last month who was sinking in quicksand and he didn't want me to help him out of the pit without his TV, I did and he was mad at me but he was ALIVE at least,"

Lisa thought about that for a moment, shaking her head slowly

"I'm not even going to address that weird circumstance.... look, if there's something you CAN do, then do it, but if you're just talking yourself blue in the face to someone who isn't ready to accept anything you say, then all you're doing is making the problem worse for both of you,"

She gave another slow nod, sighing quietly and looking down

"I just... want to help, and I don't know how to disconnect from ... taking on the problem myself,"

"That's something that comes with practice and maturity unfortunately, you're what? Nineteen? Ha, you're still practically a baby- and I don't mean that as an insult for once, I just mean.... you're taking on too much, you're acting like you have to instantly know how to fix the world when, by most standards, you're still barely an adult, and I know superheroes have this insatiable need to save ALL the things but you need to learn now as a person, before you have to cross this bridge as a superhero, that you CAN'T save everyone, especially not from themselves, and you can't fix or do everything, it's just... not possible, I mean, think about it, what do you do in an average day?"

"Work as a barista and fight crime as Star Girl... and coach girl's soccer, and help my niece with her ballet, and attend charity functions, and check in with my friend and volunteer at the animal shelter and usually I'm in a meeting with the government at least four days a week, and on weekends I help the community theater,"

"Dear lord.... when do you SLEEP?"

"Usually I get in an hour or two during the government meetings so...."

Lisa shook her head, rolling her eyes and sighing

"And I bet you still don't think that's enough huh?"

"Well of course not! There are so many other things I should be doing and-"

"And sleeping would be one of those things, listen, I'm not going to tell you how to live your life, and you showing up to fight me at half power or less is really a benefit on my part, but seriously... listen to me when I tell you that no one can do it all, and- I can't believe I'm saying this but.... your health needs to come first, I don't know how health works in your alien body but I do know that even you can get overdone, don't force yourself to burn out by trying to take on too much, and please, for everyone's sake, learn to detach from other people's problems,"

Quinn smiled shyly, nodding in acceptance and turning towards her enemy

"Thanks,"

"Of course, now are you going to fight me or what?"

"Mmmm, actually I'm going to take your advice and go home and get some sleep, I think my brother is here with the police so you can fight him though!"

And without another word Star Girl flew away, going home to do the truly heroic thing: Take care of herself for once instead of trying to juggle the rest of the world's problems

She didn't know how well she would be able to put Dr. Trouble's advice into practice, but she was going to try, and the next time Ruby didn't take her advice, she was going to try her hardest not to take it personally

In the meantime Dr. Trouble was left fighting with Star Girl's brother- Star Boy- in a battle that consisted mostly of nose pinching and hair pulling

And when she finally gave up and flew home to confront her mother-in-law she only had one thing to say for herself

"I have never been so gypped in my entire life!"

The Red Bandit

Once upon a time

In a city full of danger

There lived a superhero by the name of The Red Bandit

Or just Red, for short

Red was the primary defender of Roselake City for three years, until one day when she was offered a new position

You see Roselake City is a considerably small town, at least in comparison to some, and the position Red was suddenly being offered was from a massive metropolis by the name of Sparrow City

Sparrow City has several superheroes to take care of them, but one of their most powerful- Madam Margret- had to go out of commission for some time, thus inviting The Red Bandit to take her place as a substitute in the meantime

Delighted by the offer, Red hurried to pack up her things, leave Roselake in the capable hands of her sidekick The Blue Bandit, and said her goodbyes before heading to Sparrow City

She wasn't sure what to expect when she got there, but it certainly wasn't what she received

"And now if you'll please give a big round of applause for our newest superhero, The Red Bandit!"

When Red stepped out onto the stage where the mayor was presenting her she was relieved to hear a big round of applause, complete with whooping and whistling...

Well....

From half the audience

The other half were stone-faced and clearly displeased, with a few even booing and sneering

"Um... hello there, I'm The Red Bandit, I'll be taking over for Madam Margret while she's on maternity leave, I plan on doing everything in my power to keep this city safe and protecting the people within it,"

There didn't seem to be any response, just... blank stares...

Red cleared her throat, trying not to fidget

"That's it."

A few sections of the audience cheered and clapped while the rest were just eerily silent, so she took the opportunity to "fast walk" off stage, hurrying to go back to the hotel she was staying at

Unfortunately, her fast walking wasn't fast enough

"So you're our new substitute superhero hm?"

The voice was deep and somewhat... haughty... and she was already cringing and dreading her decision to be out in public today

"That would be me, I'm The Red Bandit," Red said politely, turning around and smiling as she extended her hand

The man in front of her seemed to be a superhero too, with a bright yellow suit, a silver cape, and no type of mask covering him, a vast difference from Red's black eye mask, red body suit, black cape, and blue accents

"I am aware, the name's Captain Magnificent, I'm sure it's an honor to meet me," he said with a bright smile

(Red wondered how many hours a day he spent bleaching his teeth)

"Sure it's... it's really something,"

"I know," he chuckled, slicking his hair back and winking at no one in particular

Red wrinkled her nose and curled her lip, wincing as he stepped closer and wrapped an arm around her

"I heard you took out Master Mayhem,"

Finally, she thought, some sort of recognition!

"Yeah, that was me," she smiled back

"I knew Master Mayhem all the way back when he was Baby Busybody, it's nice to know that he has someone to... round him back up and put him back in his playpen from time to time,"

"Excuse me?" Red frowned

"I'm sure you'll make a fine sidekick, you're already an excellent babysitter," he said with a laugh, patting her arm a bit

"I am NOT anyone's sidekick!" she frowned, squirming away from him and glaring

"Well maybe not yet, but don't worry! You will be, I'm sure if you work hard enough I might even consider taking you under my wing someday," he said, winking and pointing finger-guns at her before turning to walk off

"Stay fly," he hummed, taking off into the air and laughing at what Red assumed to be his own pun

"Kill... kill... kill..." she seethed under her breath, rage blooming across her in every way she could imagine

"I see you met Norbert,"

Red turned around, eyebrows raising and snorting

"HIM? His name is NORBERT?"

"Yeah, I can think of more than one reason he'd want to keep that secret identity a secret," snickered the other, stepping out of the shadows and revealing herself to be a superhero too, with a grey suit, a grey mask with wolf-like ears on it, and a black cape

"I'm Alpha, it's nice to meet you, don't pay any attention to him, he's one pimple away from turning into a super villain for vanity alone,"

"Thanks, I really appreciate that," Red replied with a shy smile

"Of course, trust me, no one deserves to be subjected to ~Captain Magnificent~," Alpha laughed, tossing her long brown hair over her shoulder as she started to walk alongside The Red Bandit

"I'll say, how did that guy ever get to be a superhero anyway?"

"Maybe his first enemy had a mirror attached to his costume," Red snickered

Alpha just laughed again, shaking her head slowly

"Ohh man... you're going to do great here,"

"You really think so? I mean the citizens don't seem all that fond of me," she said shyly

"Aw they'll warm up to you, they're just really attached to Madam Margret, but trust me, you're going to be one of their favorites," she winked teasingly

Red chuckled then, but Alpha was right

Over the two months that Red was there taking Madam Margret's place fighting crime and saving the town, she really DID win over the hearts of almost everyone

Sure there were still people who didn't like her, they were too attached to Madam Margret, but there were plenty of other people who absolutely LOVED The Red Bandit

Some liked her, some liked her a lot, and some... liked her a little bit too much

She was relatively used to signing autographs and taking pictures, it was kind of par for the course, but she WASN'T used to TV reporters

stalking her and insisting that she and Captain Magnificent were "made for each other" (ew)

She was used to saving people and stopping crime but she didn't know how to handle fan sites and people showing her pictures that they painted of her or reciting poems that they wrote for her

She just... didn't know how to handle it all... and secretly she was relieved when the two months were over and she could finally get ready to return to Roselake

"We'd like to thank you again for all of your service here in Sparrow City by presenting you with this Medal of Honor, I hope you've enjoyed your time here," the mayor said with a soft smile as she offered the medal to Red

"Thank you Mayor Kelsey," Red replied as she accepted the medal

"I really have enjoyed my time in Sparrow City, mostly everyone has been so kind and accommodating, I hate to leave,"

"Then don't," she heard, looking down and seeing one of the fans that had given her flowers just a few days ago (and completely lost his mind with excitement in getting to meet her)

"That's right! The Blue Bandit has Roselake covered, you should stay here!" called another fan

"Oh I... I really don't want to um... intrude..." she said slowly

"It's no intrusion, we could always use more superheroes, Sparrow City is getting bigger by the day after all," the mayor said quickly

Red sighed, the mayor wasn't helping...

"That's very nice of you to offer but ... Roselake is my home, I-"

"WHAT are you doing?" she heard, turning to see a small bus starting to let people off right next to the fairgrounds where she was accepting the Sparrow City medal

"I... I'm sorry...?"

"The Red Bandit is OUR'S! She isn't going to stay here in Sparrow City so why would you put her in the awkward position of having to tell you people no?"

It was only then that Red recognized where the bus- and for that matter the people- were from

Roselake

"She wasn't going to reject us, she was going to say it'll be a hard change but that she'll be more than happy to make it for a city that appreciates her so much!"

"Appreciates her!? We appreciate her! We just have the good sense to let our fan flag fly in private like most normal people!"

"Oh please, that's exactly what's wrong with fan culture, we finally have all these outlets to be who we are and show it off and you people are still stuck in the dark ages thinking no one should write fanfiction on a public website!"

"Excuse me but it's YOU people who are causing the problem, exposing people and pushing fandom down the throats of celebrities!"

"Um, I'm not a celebrity-" Red said slowly

"If you would speak up-"

"If you would quit being so vocal-"

"At least WE have a shipmate for her!"

"WWhat!? We have a shipmate of our own!"

"Wait a second... what?" Red asked slowly

It didn't seem like anyone was actually paying attention to her though as her question went unanswered

"She belongs here in Sparrow City with us and Captain Magnificent!"

"No, she belongs to us! Roselake had her first and I'm sure she misses The Blue Bandit, that's her true soul mate!"

Quietly, she heard Alpha take a step towards her and leaned closer so that the other superhero could speak to her quietly

"So, what are you going to do exactly?"

"I have no idea," Red admitted

"Red belongs to us! She was ours first!"

"No, she's ours! She likes it better here!"

"Well I'd figure out something soon if I were you, before this comes to blows,"

She didn't want to admit it, but Alpha was right

This was getting out of hand and she needed to do something about it-NOW

"Everyone! Listen, everyone listen!!" she shouted, finally managing to quiet the crowds (for now)

"I'm ... honored by the people of Sparrow City who care for me so much and who are so eager for me to stay, however, I'm afraid I'll have to go home, not because Roselake owns me or anything like that, but because that's just where I live,"

She cringed, hearing the people from Roselake who had come to get her begin to cheer

"What about Captain Magnificent though? Aren't you going to miss him?"

"What would she need with him when she has the Blue Bandit at home!?"

Red let out a long, frustrated sigh

It didn't sound like anything she was saying was getting through

"They're getting pretty serious down there Red..." Alpha warned

"I know but they won't listen..."

"Maybe they need a visual cue,"

And that moment, a plastic cup went flying through the air and Red decided enough was enough, whistling and turning to suddenly bring Alpha into a gentle, but still firm kiss

Of course she heard the gasps going around, and she even heard a tiny group of people start to squeal and scream with glee

Finally she let go, face red and biting her lip as she backed away

"Sorry," She breathed

"Don't be," Alpha encouraged, pulling her a step closer

"I'm Emma, by the way," she added a moment later

Revealing your true name to anyone- even friends- was a big deal in the superhero community, it could mean revealing everything about your secret identity and that could be trouble

"Rachel, hi there," Red said back, clearly not too bothered by the risks as she turned back towards the mostly stunned audience

"I'm sorry to crush your ships like that, but hopefully you won't have your hopes up for something that won't happen now, I don't need Captain Magnificent OR the Blue Bandit,"

Red had been expecting a lot of things when she dropped that bombshell

But she HADN'T been expecting the fans to like her even MORE and become even MORE dedicated to her!

More than ever Sparrow City was determined to get her back, and Roselake was determined to keep her to themselves

"I have no idea what to do, I think they're about to kill each other," Red sighed in aggravation

"Believe me I wish I could help, but I feel confident, you'll figure out something," Alpha smirked back as she dangled playfully out the other's window

"I just hope you're right, I don't think I can take this fighting for much longer,"

The other superhero shook her head, smiling and taking Red's hand

"What you need is a mind cleared of all this, and I can provide that... if you trust me,"

Red smirked, putting her hand in Alpha's and squeezing slightly

"Explicitly," she agreed

At some point after getting home she would HAVE to deal with both the extreme fans in Roselake and in Sparrow City

She knew that, she'd have to find a way to make them be civil with each other, but for now...

For now she was too busy holding on tightly to her girlfriend as Alpha flew through the sky to give her a bird's eye view of her home

The Selkie's Promise

Once upon a time

In a land surrounded by the sea

There was born a baby girl by the name of Ashling

Ashling was a very special person

Not just in the way that all people are special, but in another way too

For Ashling was born to be a princess

Specifically, a selkie princess

Seal folk travel in pods and are spread well throughout the world, far from limited to one little place

But this certain island held quite a lot of them and it was, in fact, believed that most of the European population of selkies resided here

This population was made up not just of one or two pods, but of many

And they all looked to a single guide as a leader: The selkie princess

Ashling's mother was a sickly sort, who had come down with an illness that wouldn't seem to fade not long before Ashling was born

And it was decided after her birth that Ashling would take over her mother's place at the age of 21, even though that was extremely young for a selkie, for no one knew how long her mother would still be there and no one wanted to risk the death of the current queen

Ashling was brought up knowing that her freedom- as limited as it already was- had a clock, counting down until the moment he took her first breath on her twenty-first year, and she lived those years trying everything she could so that her youth, her freedom, would not have been wasted

For a selkie queen must always be vigilant, always be caring and kind and protective, must always be at the ready to fight back any dangers, to run away, to send help or seek help, she must always be busy trying to keep her species alive and well, for seal folk have a history of occasionally poor survival choices

Ashling was the perfect princess, not in the way that she wore pretty dresses and balanced books on her head- that doesn't really matter at all, she was the perfect princess because she knew what it meant to be queen, and she accepted it from the moment she could taste the word on her tongue

She never fought it

She never argued it or rebelled

She was a saint of a girl, and a martyr of a seal

She always spoke kindly of her people and never once let slip how much she resented her birthright

She smiled when she spoke of her impending twenty-first year and any tears she cried were far away, and fell into the sea

She was the perfect princess

Except for one thing

At the age of six, Ashling fell in love with someone she could never possibly have

Being that she was the princess of all seal folk on the island, she did in fact still belong specifically to one pod, and every seven years the pod traveled to the mainland in the human realm to remind themselves of what humanity is like

The pods switch off, every year is someone's year, and when Ashling was six, it was her pod's year

Selkies are ruled by the number seven

Seven years between the times that they can walk on human land after becoming a seal again, that's where it came from, and as such seal folk try to shape their legends and schedules around the number seven

The seventh moon is always to be celebrated more than any other each year

Seven hearts had to break before the selkies deserted the human land

Seven tears fell into the ocean from the very first selkie and that's why the water became saltwater

Seven days to be spent on human land every seven years to remind them of humanity

And on Ashling's seventh day on human land, she met a human boy by the name of Killian

The two of them made sand castles together on the beach and when a terrible wind blew them down and chilled Ashling, Killian gave his coat up to her

It was a nice coat, and she wished to thank him- perhaps with selkie coins or treasures or favors- but when she turned he was standing, reciting that his mother was calling him home, and promising that he would see her again

"Tomorrow!" he had said

Ashling knew there would be no tomorrow for them

But Ashling was wrong

Seven years passed and her pod returned to the same mainland shores

Ashling brought the human coat with her, just in case she figured, lying to the people who questioned it by claiming it was her favorite and the human lands were cold

The people wanted to keep their princess as happy as they possibly could, and so upon her explanation, very happily helped her transport

the coat to the human realm with them without getting it soaked in the sea

On her second day in the human world at the age of thirteen, Ashling found the boy who had given her the coat, though it was barely more than a jacket on her now

Killian was in town and the moment he saw Ashling's striking red hair he had recognized her, the coat was a second indicator

For six days Ashling and Killian were inseparable

She explained to her pod that she wished to learn about the human world, and what better way to do that than with a human guide?

They were weary, but said nothing, after all Ashling was such a perfect princess, there was no reason for her to jeopardize anything

Ashling didn't explain where she had been for seven years and Killian didn't ask a second time

Only an hour after seeing her again, Killian once more offered Ashling his coat- "It's freezing, you can't expect that little thingy to keep you warm," he had said

And with reluctance Ashling accepted the gift

On the fifth day Killian asked if Ashling was going to leave again

And he took her silence as a yes

Ashling kept the coats- both of them- for another seven years, and buried herself in them when things were too much

On her twentieth year they went back, and by the suggestion of her mother, they waited until the week before Ashling's birthday, so that her last moment in the human world could be as fresh in her mind as possible

For once a selkie ascends the throne, they cannot go back to the human realm, no matter how many years pass, it's for their own safety or at

least, so they're told

At the age of twenty and fifty-one weeks, Ashling arrived back at the mainland wearing the jacket she had been given when she was thirteen

And it was much too small on her but she wore it anyway

She didn't waste a second of time and immediately sought out Killian

The mainland was small and no match for a selkie nose, nor the inquisitive powers of a beautiful young woman, and she found him before sunset

He didn't ask where she had been and she didn't tell him how long she had to spend with him

But for six days they had the best time of either of their lives and fell even more deeply in love than they had been fourteen years ago

On the eve of the sixth night Ashling found herself telling Killian the truth about everything

She was drunk on lack of sleep- having wanted to spend as much time with her true love as possible- and intoxicated by the feeling of his warm arms wrapped around her

And so she stared up at the moon, wrapped a blanket from the hotel bed around her shoulders, and started to tell Killian the truth- all of it

When the sun started to rise in the morning she had just finished explaining the full moon calendar to him when she was reminded somberly of what would be happening the next day

Killian noticed the sudden change of mood and asked what was behind it

And so, figuring she had already said more than too much about her world, she figured a little more couldn't possibly hurt and went into the explanation of what her twenty-first birthday would mean for her

It was exhausting, trying to explain it all

And it hurt to remember it the way she did

But she was surprised to find that after her explanation was through, Killian hadn't left

He hadn't laughed

He hadn't made any ill attempts at anything at all

He merely stepped closer to her on the balcony of the hotel, took her hand and leaned down to press their foreheads together

"I will help you in any way that I can," he promised, cupping her face gently and leaning down to press his lips to her's

Their first kiss

And Ashling feared that it would be their last

Love makes people do crazy things, but she never held any illusions about her duties as a queen and never considered running away from it, no matter how badly she wanted to or how appealing the idea sounded at times

And so, upon Killian's suggestion, that afternoon the couple went to see the elders of the pod to present them with their love

To propose to them that perhaps Killian could come to the faery realm and live as a makeshift selkie

The elders not only didn't accept- they were outraged

They were mortified that such a thought had ever crossed Ashling's mind and repulsed by the very idea of it

They insisted quickly that Killian be removed from their sight- and removed from the presence of the princess

Ashling was devastated and she reached out for him with everything she had, despite the elders grasping firmly on her to keep her away

In the last few moments Killian had of struggling, he shed his coat and

rushed to drape it around her shoulders

"Don't let yourself get cold," he had said, before the other selkies pulled him away from the beach and back into the town

"We must go!" proclaimed one of the elders

"NO!" Ashling ruptured

"We will not cut our visit a day short..."

The compromise was that Ashling would stay at the beach, always nearest the sea, and never wander too far onto the land

The young selkie felt heartache greater than she ever had before and for the first time in her life she openly expressed regret

Regret for her bloodline, regret for her crown, regret for her birth as a selkie

Her people, having never seen anything like it, stood by in stunned silence as the kind, gentle, peace bringing princess crumbled to pieces in front of them

She shook despite the fact that there was no wind to chill her and she breathed in the scent on the coat as she clasped it close to her chest

And she began to sob

Her tears streamed like rivers from her eyes and splashed the beach, soaked the sand like tiny ocean waves

And seeing her mourn so greatly, hearing her song as she wailed in such grievance, it made the other selkies in her pod begin to cry as well

But the elders held true, and they insisted that she must never see the human boy again, using Ashling's tears as the perfect proof that humans could only ever bring pain to sealfolk

The sunset and Ashling still wailed, despite how hoarse her voice had gotten or how dry her tears had started to run, she still mourned her lost love

And as the moon began to rise, she knew that she only had hours left, and she walked into the sea with her human legs, abandoning her seal coat on the beach and hugging Killian's coat to her chest as she walked

The wind blew through her long red locks and she remembered how much Killian had loved them, how beautifully they had blended with his own jet black hair

And a new wave of sorrow hit her, just hard enough to force a few more tears to drop from her eyes as she stood knee-deep in the sea

They were small tears, nothing like the running rivers she had cried before, but they were tears nonetheless

Three dropped from each eye, making six

And then a seventh rolled slowly down her cheek, hanging on her chin for a moment before one last, broken sob sent it into the ocean with the rest

And as the moon rose higher, and she gripped the coat tighter, she looked up to find something unexpected and amazing happening

Before her swam a seal, but none that she recognized from the island

The seal swam closer and closer, and rose out of the water as a dull white glow wrapped around it

Moments later a beautiful woman with hair long and colored like the night sky stepped towards her, draping her sealskin across her arm as she stared down at the young princess

"My darling child, why is your heart breaking so?"

"Because I cannot be with the one I love," Ashling sobbed

"And why is this? Did the one you love hurt you?"

"No,"

"Leave you?"

"No."

"Pass on to the heavens?"

"No,"

"Then my darling child, why can you not be with the one you love?"

"Because," Ashling sniffed, wiping her tears on the back of her hand

"I am a selkie, and he is a human, I am the princess and after tonight, I cannot ever return here, I can never see him again,"

The elder selkie looked perplexed as she stepped closer, resting a hand on Ashling's shoulder

"Who has told you these lies?"

"They are no lies, it's my duty as a princess to watch over my island, I cannot risk leaving it once I become queen,"

"Even so, my darling child, why can your love not go with you?"

"It's forbidden," she replied faintly, not looking up as the woman stared at those on the beach and began to walk towards them

"Why are you depriving one of my daughters from her heart's desire?" the elder selkie accused as she stepped onto the sand

"Because the humans are dangerous, they cause nothing but pain and suffering!" one of the elders protested

"You cannot paint all humans with the same brush, you cannot paint all of any one kind with the same brush, I know well the suffering humans impose upon seal-women's hearts, when I salted the sea with my seven tears so long ago, it was over a human,"

"What had they done?" one of the other selkies asked quietly

"She left me, to go and live with the angels among the clouds, I mourned her because I knew that it would be too long before I could join her, and I mourned so much that I became a spirit of the sea, I live in the sky

with her now but the sea still calls to me when one of my children is in pain, my love was taken from me without any choice from either of us, you are taking the choices away from this beautiful child, don't let your cynicism turn into blatant cruelty,"

"M'lady things are even worse than they were then! The humans are killing our queen!" shouted one of the other elders

Ashling jerked her head up, staring in confusion at the elder

"What do you mean? Mama is ill, how can-?"

"How do you think she got ill, child? Your father was human, just like that boy, and your mother tried to balance herself on the line between this world and ours, and when she couldn't, when someone found out, they coveted her skin, and they put bitter herbs in her and your father's food, if were it not for the magic in her blood, she would have died with him that day, your father's ignorance and your mother's innocence caused two deaths, she does not have an eternity, the poison may not have killed her then but she couldn't get rid of it fast enough and one day it will take her too, just like human sins will take you some day if you allow that boy to cloud your mind and muddle your judgment,"

Having never heard the story of her mother's illness before, Ashling's grief finally became too much and she collapsed in the water, her hoarse voice crying out in agony as she clutched her beloved's coat closer, her eyes stung and ached but she could swear that the saltwater around her was empowering new tears to gather in her eyes

"Have you spoken to Bridget?" the selkie woman asked

"Have you asked her if she ever regretted meeting and loving that man?"

"Well of course we have."

"And what has her answer always been?"

No one answered and the woman huffed in disappointment, turning to Ashling and stepping back into the ocean towards her

"Your mother loved your father my dear girl, and no matter how much

pain she's in, she has never once regretted a single day with him, that is love, taking the bad, the pain, the mourning, and still not being able to find it in yourself to regret loving someone, and if I ask you now, if you could go back to that day fourteen years ago and never meet this boy, would you?"

Tired and in pain, all Ashling could gasp out was a single word

"No,"

The elder seal-woman knelt down in the water with the princess, rubbing the pads of her thumbs across Ashling's cheeks and clearing her tears

"The moon is so high in the sky my darling, you don't have much longer here before you must return to our realm, go and get your boy, bring him back, do not let fools clouded by rusted morals take away the only thing you've ever wanted for yourself,"

Ashling stared at her in disbelief, but she gave another affirmative nod and a second sharp "Go!" and she found the strength in her legs again to move

She waded through the water, fought through the wet sand and stumbled up the hill of the beach

She ran across the pavement and tripped over the cobblestone as she went searching for Killian in the town

She could barely breathe, much less catch a scent with her sinuses in such bad form from her relentless sobbing, and so she stood in the center of the village with nothing

She had no voice to call out for him, it was too rusted from screaming

She had no energy to rush around searching each house, her legs were shaking as it was

She had no song she could sing, no signal she could bring, and with a heavy heart, she began to sway, the wind chilling her suddenly as she began to put on the coat, her hair blowing around her like angry red

waves as she struggled to keep standing

And then, in one moment, everything changed

"ASHLING!?"

She looked up, turned around, and stared at Killian as he looked out the window of a house behind her

"Ashling!! Stay right there! I'm coming down! Please, please don't go!"

Powerless to do anything else, the selkie merely held herself tightly and waited as the door slammed open and Killian burst out

Her legs stumbled, as if she were still walking with a seal flipper rather than human feet, but she ran anyway, her arms catching around his neck as her body sagged and he held his arms around her to keep her up

"What time is it?" she breathed

"Half past eleven," Killian answered

Sniffing quietly to herself, she wrapped her fingers tightly in his hair, like an anchor, like an unforgiving vice, and he lifted her with ease in his arms as she held onto his neck tighter

"Please, let me spirit you away," she said quietly, tucking her head against his chest

Killian nodded, beginning to walk back towards the beach and keeping his grip steady on the girl

"You can have me any way you want me, as long as you promise me something,"

"What's that?"

"Promise that you'll never let me put you down again,"

Ashling smiled, wrapping herself tighter in the coat as a single, happy tear rolled down her cheek

"You have my word,"

The Skrillburry Knights

Once upon a time

In a land vast and green

There lived a clan of Fae Folk called Skrillings

The Skrillings were a tiny bunch, with lithe, long bodies, with grey skin and massive eyes of varying colors and shades, their hair ranged from the palest of white to the darkest of black and every shade in between, their fingers long and thin, only possessing three and a thumb on each hand

The Skrillings had wings, but they were often hidden, as they liked to keep them tucked into their backs, as their wings are so frail and thin, that even a sharp wind could damage them

The Skrillings are tiny, only the size of a gecko really, and they all lived in a tiny community in the woods, in a small forest in Ireland, that they called Skrillburry

The Skrillings are a very peaceful folk, they enjoy spending their time napping in flowers and preparing dishes with berries and acorns- one raspberry could last a Skrilling all day so it wasn't hard to accomplish- and bathing in rain puddles

However, the rest of the world is not, and never has been, nearly so simple

Eventually, other beings found Skrillburry, and they began destroying it

Of course Skrillburry was so small that most intruders had no idea that they were intruding on anything to begin with

However, that didn't change the fact that the Skrillings were under crisis

But they had no way of protecting themselves and yet the dangers in the world were only increasing day after day

Finally the Skrillings all came together to announce a decision they had made

The elders approached the younger Skrillings and explained that they were going to create a band of knights to protect the kingdom

And, as it turned out, it was a good thing that they did

Not too long after appointing the Knights Of Skrillburry, the Skrillings found their home under constant attack

Trolls, ogres, elves, any and every type of Fae Folk tried to take Skrillburry to expand their own territory

But luckily, of course, the Skrillburry Knights were there to take care of business

Among the knights were three siblings, Kir, Skrik, and Cantalessi

Kir was the oldest, with beautiful brown hair and the darkest of brown in his eyes

Skrik was the middle child, with hair as white as snow and eyes as black as coal, one completely contrasting the other

And then there was Cantalessi, the youngest child

With eyes of the brightest blue and hair the softest grey, she both fit perfectly and didn't fit at all with her brothers

Kir and Skrik were two of the largest Skrillings there, while Cantalessi was one of the smallest

No one took her very seriously, but as they would eventually learn, THAT was a mistake...

You see, although it was difficult keeping creatures like trolls and elves and ogres away, none was nearly as difficult as humans

Or to be specific A human

A small human in fact, just a three-year-old toddler

But of course, a human toddler was not at all small to a Skrilling

In fact, they were quite large, giant even

And the Skrilling were completely unsure of what to do with them

All of the other invaders, they were able to take out with relative ease, some of their favorite methods including water balloons, stink bombs, and poison ivy traps

But none of this worked with the human child

Water balloons were barely raindrops

Stink bombs against a dull human nose blended in with the natural scents of the forest

And poison ivy traps were stepped right over as if they were nothing

The Skrilling were ready to give up and the knights were having to prepare themselves to tell the others that they were going to have to soon leave Skrillburry

But just as all hope seemed lost, Cantalessi proposed that she had an idea that might work

Her brothers listened, and although they didn't believe for a second that it would work, they figured it couldn't possibly make things any worse, and so they suggested it to the other knights of Skrillburry

The other knights were in agreement- although they didn't think it would actually work, there was no harm left in trying, whatever the worst scenario could be, it couldn't be like losing their home to the giants known as humans

And so they set to work, knowing exactly what position the sun was in when the toddler human came by every day, chasing her toy ball straight into Skrillburry

She came just as predicted, the time exactly the same, and this time the Skrillings were ready for her

They gathered rocks and leaves and sticks and all kinds of various shrubbery and waited

And this time when the child came running towards Skrillburry, the Skrillings put their collection to good use

They constructed their various pieces of shrubbery together until they had formed a large, intimidating looking structure, and placed it in just the right light to cast a shadow on the large rock across from them

Kir and Skrik began making all sorts of loud, grumbling noises and when the toddler looked over to the rock and saw the shadow of the fake creature she began to whimper, her eyes welling up with tears and her bottom lip shaking

But, before she could begin to cry, another shadow appeared, this one was much smaller than the other and carried a tiny, toothpick like sword

The child stared on with wonder as the tiny shadow fought against the larger one, ultimately reigning victorious as the larger shadow disappeared

And a moment later, Cantalessi appeared before her, sporting her sword the size of a toothpick and fluttering up close to land on the child's hand

The toddler stared at her, beginning to giggle as Cantalessi gave a dramatic bow

"Lydia! Darling come here!"

The child turned towards the voice and when she looked back, Cantalessi was gone

Although the Skrillings were certain that Cantalessi's plan wouldn't work, they found, with much shock, that it did

Oh sure, the child still wandered back towards Skrillburry every day, but this time instead of stomping around and almost crashing through

Skrillburry, she always paused- just outside of the Skrillings' home, to stare on in wonder

No one was quite sure if she could see the Skrillings from her distance at that point, but one thing was certain

She never forgot Cantalessi

Decades passed and the little girl grew up, and as she grew she began sharing stories about the Skrillings and about the tiniest one with the brightest blue eyes who came to her that day to show her that the Skrillings were there to protect her from the evils of the world

No one is sure where Skrillburry is in modern times, or even if it still exists

But those who are descended from that little girl believe

Do you?

The Story Of Changes And Wishes

Once upon a time

In a land close to the sea

There lived a little girl, who was only five years old

The little girl was forced to leave that land close to the sea

She left with her parents to another land, half a world away, where everything was different

Sure there were some things that were the same

Dogs barked and the sky was still blue and her parents still treated her like the most valuable treasure they could ever have found

But there were many things that were different too

The language they spoke was different

The food they ate was different

The clothes they wore were different

There were so many different things

And at first the little girl felt so very alone because she was the only one who seemed to see these things as new or different or strange

In fact, there were more people who stared at her as if she were the odd one here

She truly wasn't sure what to do about it, but it felt terrible

All of this- this being different, being strange, being treated badly... it all felt so horrible, it ached terribly, like nothing she had ever felt before

However, not all was at a complete loss

For there was ONE bright spot in the bleak new world

"I'm Emily! What's your name? Do you want me to show you around the school?"

The little girl looked up at the face in front of her, round and young like her own but instead of long black hair the girl sported bouncing blond curls

"Rin," she replied quietly, although she understood little English, she at least knew when someone was asking for her name

Emily was a beaming, beautiful ball of light, she reached out and took Rin's hand, giving it a squeeze

"You and I are going to be best friends, I just know it!"

And she was right

For the next ten years Emily and Rin were inseparable

They became closer than twins and did everything they could together

Sleepovers, birthday parties, staying up far past their bedtimes on the phone, you name it

But perhaps their favorite activity was listening to Rin's mother as she recited stories

Legends that most people would swear were false

"It's a good thing that we aren't most people then," Emily would always tease

And Rin would laugh but she would wonder

Why WAS Emily so different?

Why did they click like they did?

She never said anything though, afraid that if she got too close to the magic- if she reached out and touched it- that it would pop like a bubble in front of her and disappear and she would have Emily no more

Their favorite story was always a romantic one

It was about a girl who was so in love that she cried ten million tears upon her lover's death and accidentally washed away his body

In distress, the girl had called out to Heaven and the angels above, begging them for a way to retrieve his body so that she may lay it to rest and say goodbye one last time

And the Heavens and the Gods, aching ever so for her poor heart, granted her wish, and she became a mermaid

It always made the girls cry but they couldn't get enough of it either

And then one day, when they were at the gentle age of fifteen, bad news came for them

Emily's father had to leave, much like Rin's father once had to do, and Emily would no longer be in this unusual land

She would be an ocean away

And Rin wondered as she cried that night, if she could make an ocean with her tears like the girl in the story had done

If it worked, it was an invisible and very, very dense ocean for Rin couldn't see it and couldn't feel it

This did not stop her from being horribly sad and every day she missed Emily more terribly than the last

For three years, Rin and Emily missed each other more than words could describe

But luckily- or perhaps it was due to fate- after three years, Emily was finally coming back to Rin

And they were both unwaveringly excited

However, as luck would have it, the good streak only lasted for a little while, for the day that Emily was to arrive back, a terrible storm picked up and threatened the boats at sea...

Including Emily's

So worried was Rin, that she began to cry once again

But her tears did not help her

So terrified was she, that she began to scream out to the Heavens to help her

But the Heavens did not answer

And so in love was she, that she was willing to risk her life to save that of her friend

She did not cry another tear or scream another word, she merely took action

She ran from her house and towards the peer and ignored all of the warnings she was given on her way

She knew the risks but she wanted to take them anyway

For it was better, in Rin's opinion, that Emily be saved before she

As soon as she found the pier, she wasted not a moment before diving into the water

The storm was raging but she didn't care

She could barely swim but she didn't care

Her head couldn't stay above water but she didn't care

For she knew that Emily's ship was due here soon and it would most likely not survive trying to port

Rin swam and swam, and to her confusion she didn't find herself drowning

Only several minutes after she had jumped into the water did she bother to look down, and when she did....

She found that instead of two legs, she now sported a tail

A mermaid's tail

Rin didn't bother stopping to wonder or ponder or even ask, she just kept swimming

And she swam and swam

Until finally a ship came into sight

A very familiar ship

And the closer she came, the more the ship truly came into view... or rather.... who was on the ship

"Emily..."

Just as she predicted the ship was sinking

It had crashed and was going down quickly, and Emily was struggling to stay clutching onto the deck

She didn't know how, or if she would ever regain her aquatic powers, but she swam closer and managed to pull herself onto the ship's deck, and the moment she did, her tail returned to legs

"Emily!!" she shouted over the bellowing of the storm

There was no reply

"Emily!!!" she screamed again

This time, in the distance, she saw a familiar mess of blond- no longer so bouncy thanks to the storm- look up at her

"Rin? But how did you-"

"That isn't important right now!" Rin insisted, racing closer and taking the other girl's hand

"Emily you have to jump into the water!"

"What!?"

"Please!" Rin begged

"Emily please listen to me! You must jump!"

Emily hesitated, her survival instincts interfering with the blind trust she had for Rin

But with only a moment left, she took the advice and jumped off of the ship

Not knowing if her blessing from earlier was even still there, and not knowing if she was strong enough to swim through the storm even if it was, she didn't care though

She had one priority, one goal, and if she could accomplish that... that was all that mattered to her

She jumped into the water once more, swimming forward where Emily was quickly sinking to the bottom of the sea and scooping her up, swimming back to the surface with little struggle

Things changed in that moment

For when they arrived back at the surface, no longer was Rin merely human, she was- from then and forevermore- a mermaid

And when they arrived back at the surface, no longer were Rin and Emily long lost friends

Now, they were something else

Something stronger

Something full of light and love and adoration

For when Emily pulled Rin closer and they shared their first kiss, it felt like a warm burst- a spark- was ignited, even in the freezing rain

Rin asked her mother about these things later

About what Emily was to her

About how she managed to become a mermaid

And her mother smiled coyly, pulling her sleeve over a few scales that were peeking out on her skin, and turning back to her daughter

"The heart," she said simply, "Is capable of magical things."

That's all she said then

That's all she would ever say

And strangely, Rin found herself being OK with that

With Emily back in her life, Rin found herself being OK with a lot of things, no matter how hard they were to get used to, how different and difficult they were to learn, or much of a barrier there seemed to be between them

With Emily, she found a way to smile through it

The Thistle Field

Once upon a time

In a land full of woodland folk

There lived a fox named Flora

Flora was a very curious fox, and on top of that, she was a fox who really loved to eat

Which, as one can imagine, lead to some interesting combinations over the years

Usually Flora found the answer she was looking for within only a few days of the initial onset of any mystery...

All except for one:

The Great Purple Berry Mystery

All the way on the other side of the woods, you see, there was a large patch of purple berries and Florida didn't know what they were

To make matters worse, no one at home seemed to know anything about them either, as far as they were concerned it was just another part of nature that they weren't meant to explore

"Don't worry yourself sick child," warned her father, "Just enjoy what you have here and have yourself a pear,"

But Flora didn't want a pear, Flora wanted a purple berry

And so the little fox spent all her time trying to figure out ways to get across the field of thistle to where the berries were

She thought on one occasion that if she jumped far enough and high enough she could simply jump over the field, but it did not work and she landed in the scratchy, prickly thistle

On another occasion she figured that if she stepped very, very lightly, she could simply walk across the field of thistle on the tops of the flowers, but that didn't work either

And on a third occasion, she believed that she could perhaps dig a tunnel to get beneath the field and make her way to the berries, but that didn't seem to work either and all she did was get stuck in a hole

Just when Flora was beginning to think that it was impossible to get to the other side of the field, she spied something amazing in the dead of night

She watched a human woman walk clean through it

She didn't seem bothered by the thistle at all and in fact spent quite some time simply standing or wandering through the field of prickly flower stems

Flora was amazed and immediately wished to know the woman's secret for this, so she ran to the edge of the forest just before the field began and called out to her

"Excuse me!" she called

"Excuse me Miss!"

But the human woman didn't seem to hear her and, much to Flora's absolute shock, she didn't just leave- she vanished right in front of the fox's eyes!!

"Mama! Mama!" Flora called out as she ran back towards her home in the forest, barreling into the fox hole her family lived in and hurrying to wake her mother

"What is it Flora?" her mother groaned quietly as she tried her hardest to ignore the cries of her daughter and go back to sleep

"There was a human in the thistle field and she disappeared!!"

"That's nice dear," her mother muttered, "Now go back to sleep,"

With an unsatisfied huff, Flora realized that she wasn't going to get any answers from her mother tonight, so she decided to go in search of someone who WOULD answer her

Crawling out of the fox hole, she made her way through the forest, looking for anyone who was still awake

But this proved to be harder than she thought it would be

The rabbits were asleep

The deer were asleep

The birds were asleep...

Well, except for one that is

"Who!!" she heard, looking up into the trees and blinking in surprise when she saw an owl staring down at her

"Who?" she repeated, taking a few steps back

"WHO are YOU?" the owl hooted

"I am FLORA, WHO are YOU?" she asked in return

"I am Octavia," the owl answered, flapping her wings a little bit as she stared down at the young fox

"Isn't it awfully late for you to be out here all alone? Or awake, for that matter?" the owl noted

"Yes but I've come to ask a question, might you know the answer?"

"I might, what is your question?"

"There was a human woman in the thistle field and she vanished into thin air! Do you know who she is? Or how she did that?"

"Hmm? Oh, you must mean Georgia, yes she comes to these parts quite often, she has quite the grand view of the moon from the thistle field,"

"That's great, but who IS she? And how did she just... vanish like that?"

Octavia hummed a few more times, tilting her head from side to side as she stared down at the fox

"She vanished because Georgia is a ghost," Octavia said simply

And of all the answers Flora expected, that was certainly not one of them

"What?"

"I said, Georgia is a ghost, which is how she vanishes when she pleases and how she manages to go unbothered in the thistle field,"

"Oh..." Flora mumbled quietly

She wanted to ask how Georgia had become a ghost but... she thought that might not be any of her business

"Do you know how I could speak to her? She didn't answer me last time,"

"She likely didn't hear you, if she had heard you she would have answered, she's surprisingly friendly for a ghost," the owl explained

"So if I go back tomorrow evening will she be there? Will she answer me?"

"Well... I suppose so," Octavia said a bit hesitantly

And so Flora's mind was made up, she would go back the next evening and introduce herself to this ghost

The next day was much longer than Flora was expressly comfortable with, she was so excited for the evening to come that it felt as though the entire day just dragged on and on and on...

But the moment evening came, she rushed off as quickly as she could and sat by the edge of the field to wait for Georgia to appear

Luckily she didn't have to wait long, Georgia showed up just as the moon rose up high and clear in the sky

"Hello!! Hello!!" Flora called out

This time she actually did get a response, upon hearing the fox's voice, Georgia turned around and smiled warmly at Flora, gliding smoothly over to her and crouching down to be at her level

"Hello there little fox, what's your name?"

"I'm Flora, you're Georgia aren't you?"

The ghost seemed mildly surprised, although generally delighted, that Flora knew who she was and smiled a little bit more at her

"That's correct, I'm Georgia, what can I do for you?"

"I just wondered how it was that you're managing to stand in the thistle field without getting uncomfortable, Octavia said it was because you're a ghost but I don't quite understand what that has to do with anything,"

Georgia blinked at her in surprise, placing a finger at her chin as she tried to figure out how to explain it

"Well... it's a little bit complicated, hold out your paw if you will,"

And, having no reason to deny the request, Flora moved her paw out towards the ghost, gasping in shock as Georgia reached out to shake it... and yet her hand fell right through the paw

"I... don't understand, you're not.... solid?"

"Precisely, I can't feel anything I'm afraid,"

"That's... so sad," Flora said sympathetically

"Oh it isn't so bad, not all is at a loss," she said with a small shrug

Still though, the idea of not being able to feel anything was one that Flora couldn't imagine being OK with, even if it did mean she could stand in the field of thistle without any consequences

"Was there something that intrigued you about this field? You seem quite taken with it," Georgia noted

"O-Oh no, not the field, it's... those purple berries over there," she explained, nodding towards the other end of the field where the berries were

"I was curious about them,"

"Ohh.. I see, would you like me to have some sent to you?"

"Sent to me?" the fox asked in confusion

"Yes, I knew a few bird friends, they can deliver the berries to you tomorrow if you'd like,"

"Really?"

Georgia nodded, giving the fox another warm smile

"I would love that! Thank you so much!"

"Don't mention it, but you should probably get home before it gets much later, we wouldn't want your parents to worry,"

It was a little reluctant, but ultimately Flora agreed, giving her a farewell before heading back home to her den

The next morning Flora was surprised to find that when she woke up there was a branch full of purple berries waiting for her outside

And upon eating one, she discovered that it was the best thing she had ever tasted!!

She called upon her parents and her siblings and her friends, all very eager to try the mysterious purple berries

And upon eating them, they had the same reaction that Flora did- believing that the berries were, in fact, the best thing they had ever eaten

And they were quite eager to taste more

So Flora went back that night to wait at the edge of the forest for Georgia to appear

And just like clockwork, when the moon became high in the sky, Georgia appeared in the thistle field

"Hello! Georgia hello!!" called Flora

"Oh Flora, well hello there! Did you enjoy the berries?" Georgia called back

"Yes they were remarkable!! Thank you so much! How can I repay you?" the little fox yipped, excitedly bouncing all around the edge of the field- but being careful not to actually step in

"You're quite welcome, and you don't have to repay me, there's really nothing that I could use as payment anyhow, if you'd like I can have more delivered to you, I really don't mind it,"

"You really don't?"

"No not at all, it gives me something to do, being a ghost, you see, is not very fulfilling, it gets very lonely, and so having something to fill my time with- no matter how short or small- is very... liberating,"

Flora considered that for a few moments, she knew being a ghost couldn't be fun but she hadn't really thought about how lonely it must be...

It was then that she came up with an idea- a very good idea if she said so herself- of how to repay Georgia for her kindness

"You'll be here again tomorrow night won't you?"

"I will, as I am here every night," the ghost promised

"Then I will see you again then,"

And with that, Flora bounced off back to her home, eager to see the look on Georgia's face the next night when she gifted her with the surprise

As promised, the next morning brought more berries, courtesy of Flora's new friend- though this time it was much more than just a branch, it was an entire bushel!

It truly struck her just how kind Georgia was, and although she said that it was no bother and that she really didn't mind doing it, Flora still knew that she did it out of the kindness of her heart

Which was exactly what Flora was about to do in turn

And when that night came and the moon rose high up in the sky, Georgia came into the field and found quite a shocking thing

There, on the edge of the forest, was a party

There were torches lit up and music being played, there were pretty decorations and food laid out as far as the eye could see, and most of all there were people

Foxes and owls and opossums and rabbits and skunks and squirrels and a great many deal of other forest folk who had all stayed up (well, minus the owls) just to see Georgia

And at the heart of it all, was Flora

"What is all of this?" Georgia asked in happy surprise

"It's a gift, you've been kind enough to give a gift to me so I wanted to give you one as well,"

And by the look on Georgia's face, it was quite safe to say that it was appreciated

"I... I don't know what to say except... thank you, thank you with all my heart,"

"What are friends for?" Flora smiled back

And that night began the movement of a tradition

Each year on the same night there was a celebration held in Georgia's honor- after all, Flora was far from the only person that the ghost was kind to- and the celebration soon began to broaden

Soon it wasn't only a celebration for Georgia, but for all ghosts, it became known as Ghost Night

And then a celebration even for those who had died but WEREN'T ghosts

And then that too evolved and it became a celebration of supernatural creatures

And it continued to grow and grow, and change and change over the years

And eventually, it became known as Halloween

But the origins of the day remain the same, and if anyone were to travel off far away to the forest spoken of here

They would find a fox hole, full of foxes who ate purple berries

A ghost who was kind enough to deliver said berries

And a thistle field, that had brought the two of them together

The Unicorn Guardian

Once upon a time

In a land full of beauty and wonder

There lived a girl

A very special girl named Ames

Ames had plenty of reasons for being special, but there was one in particular that everyone in the lands knew of immediately:

Her pure heart

For Ames was a keeper of magical equine, and as all know, only the most pure of heart can get near enough to magical equine to touch them

Ames had many things to do being a Keeper, but by far her favorite was caring for the babies

Magical equine had many branches and species, kelpies, pegai, and of course, unicorns to name a few

Each species had their own biology and internal rules to live by, just as they all had their own special skills and needs and desires

But none were as specific as the unicorn's, that's why Ames gave them special attention

She loved the unicorns, and she loved being around them and being able to work with them

Being a Keeper had been her greatest dream for the longest time and now that it was finally being realized she was the happiest she had ever been

She hoped that she would be able to remain a Keeper for the rest of her life to keep the magical equine safe, and she vowed to herself that she would do anything it takes to do her job correctly

Which was exactly why, when she found a disturbance nearby she vowed to do everything in her power to stop it

There was just one problem

Ames was human, so her power was considerably small in comparison to most of the creatures that lived behind the veil, for they possessed great magic

One such creature just so happened to be the goblin

And Ames, being human, only knew so much about goblins

That is to say, not much at all

She knew that they could be malevolent and had quite the mean streak but little else

However, that was all she NEEDED to know when it came to the protection of the unicorns and other magical equine

Unicorns were such sensitive creatures, the purest in any realm, she knew it wouldn't take much to upset or hurt one, and with the reputation goblins had for causing trouble and hurting the innocent, she decided to take immediate action to protect those she had vowed to keep safe

It had been a normal day in the clearing at first, the weather was such a nice blend of warm and cool breezes that Ames found herself drifting towards a light doze as she kept watch over the pen of baby unicorns, one of the foals had curled up at her side and gone to sleep already and it wasn't unusual that the others would follow suit soon

There was nothing wrong with falling into a slight nap, in fact it was common for Keepers to relax and fall into light sleeps throughout the day, it often helped the charges they were looking after to feel safe and at peace with the person looking after them

However, just as she was drifting off, she spotted a strange blur of green ahead and jerked her head up, staring into the trees ahead of her and spotting a little blob of green... a MOVING little blob of green

This shook the human awake enough and she sprung to her feet, careful to be aware of the sleeping baby unicorn beside her and avoid accidentally tripping over her

She headed for the fence that was separating the babies from the rest of the herd and swung over the side of it, picking up the baseball bat that she kept there, she stomped towards the forest and brushed aside some of the bushes and shrubbery, staring down at a small gaggle of goblins who had gathered to spy through the trees it seemed

"Out with you Goblins, you're not welcome here," she demanded protectively, pointing her baseball bat towards the back of the forest

The goblins all stared at each other, before staring at her and starting to make strange, squawking sounds that her human ears couldn't understand

"No no, out with you, you won't be getting near any unicorns today!"

One of the goblins, the biggest one, with rows of sharp teeth and large pointed ears, stepped forward and squawked louder

Ames, growing more and more protective of the equine she was in charge of, hissed back and banged the bat against a tree as a warning

The other goblins jumped, chattering something at each other before heading out, the largest one- the loudest one- glaring before reluctantly following them away

Feeling satisfied with herself, Ames left the woods and hopped back into the pen with the babies, marching over towards a little group of baby pegai and curling up with them to rest

That had gotten rid of the goblins, she felt certain, at least for the day

But the day was ALL it had gotten rid of them for

For the goblins returned the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that

Every day from that moment on the goblins returned

And every day from that moment on, Ames found herself guarding the magical equine more than ever

She did everything she could to keep the goblins away

She blocked off all of the edges of the woods that could be used to get near her herd, she scattered food on the opposite side of the forest to lead the goblins away and planted repellents and foul smelling herbs around the edges of the herd's territory to further keep them back, she even built a second fence- a taller fence, tall enough to require a door- around the pen of babies, and whenever she spotted the goblins skulking around at the edges of the forest she pulled out the bat as a threat

However, there were certain things she never did

Certain lines she refused to cross

And actually harming anyone -even the persistent and surely malicious goblins- was one of those lines

After all, she was pure of heart, and being pure of heart meant that she could never intentionally cause harm

And thus she found herself in a very frustrating predicament, for here she was, on the thirteenth straight day of finding the goblins eying her charge, and out of ideas for how to drive them away

Finally, with frustration, she set the bat aside and threw up her hands, deciding to just ask them what it would take for them to leave her equine alone

"What do you want!?" she sighed, rubbing her eyes tiredly

"I've done everything I know how to do and yet you still persist, what can I do to make you leave the unicorns in peace?"

The little group of goblins started to chatter between each other again before finally one of them was pushed forward

He looked around a bit nervously before slowly setting a small cloth down in front of Ames' feet

Staring at it skeptically, she slowly sat down in front of it and peeled the edges away, finding with surprise that in the cloth was a pile of....

Sugar cubes

"Sugar cubes?" she asked in confusion

The goblins made a series of squawking noises again, huddling together a bit closer

She didn't quite trust the goblins- or the sugar cubes for that matter- and reached down, taking one and popping it into her mouth

She waited and waited and waited... but nothing ever happened

Staring in confusion at the goblins, she took the pouch of sugar cubes and resolved to give them to the babies

"This is all? You just wanted to deliver these?"

A little more chatter and a bit of pushing before another goblin wobbled up, setting a second cloth in front of her

Curiously, Ames reached down and unwrapped it, revealing several small glowing balls

"Spells?" she guessed

The goblins all nodded and squeaked out noises of affirmation as the human picked up one of the balls and examined it

Despite being human, she had been around magic enough to recognize it in many forms now and could tell with certainty that they were protection spells

"I don't understand," she said with a frown

The goblins stared up at her, chattering and gekkering in the hopes that she would understand

"You were just trying to help me... all this time?" she guessed

The goblins began nodding, and Ames felt her heart sink in guilt

She realized that she had judged a book by its cover but she had only been doing so in order to protect the fragile and sensitive unicorns

One of the goblins stepped forward, clearing his throat and taking a few strange looking herbs out of a pouch at his side, swallowing them with ease and clearing his throat again

"Do not feel bad Miss Human," he said, his voice high and scratchy with the use of a new language

"You were only doing your job, you were protecting the unicorns just as you've been asked to do and you've done a fine job of it, we're glad that you took precautions, even if it was against us, you did the right thing, however, we did truly just wish to help with your charge, the spells will help in protecting the herd, keeping danger at bay and giving you more time to spend with them without being on such high alert, and the sugar will make a good snack for them, but there's one more gift we'd like to give,"

"What is it?" Ames asked, tilting her head to the side

"We'd like to give you the power to protect these creatures, to really, truly protect them, that is, if you're interested,"

"Of course, of course I'm interested! What do I have to do?" Ames shouted excitedly

"Nothing at all, just allow us to bless you with this gift," he replied, holding his hand out as another of the goblins marched forward dutifully and handed him a dandelion

The goblin held the dandelion up, blowing the fuzz off of it and letting it float in the air for a moment before it began to surround the human, swirling and whooshing in a magical blur before finally settling to the ground

At first, Ames didn't feel any different, but she realized a few moments later that something had changed

She could feel the magic flowing through her veins and knew that she now possessed a power greater than any in the forest, and when she began to run back to the unicorns to tell them of her glee, she could feel a shift taking over her, and when she opened her eyes once more, she found herself having taken the shape of a unicorn

It was the most indescribable and brilliant feeling, a sensation like no other, and when she turned back to the goblins, they merely offered her a smile and a palm full of sugar cubes

It was a peace offering, and a promise

A promise of good will between them

And from then on, Ames always welcomed goblins in her herd with open arms

The Unseelie Summoning

Once upon a time

In a land with many lonely hearts

There lived a man named Jordan

Jordan was quite lonely, despite having been in college for the last two years he hadn't managed to make more than one single friend, who he hadn't seen in two months due to living three hours away from him

Now that he was home for the summer his loneliness was twice as bad as before, given that he was alone in the house most of the day

Turns out online tutoring isn't such a social job after all

It was on one of those lonely summer nights when he was by himself that he decided, just for the fun of it, to wish upon a star

Maybe then he would find some kind of companionship...

"Dear ... uh... star... please send me someone who will ease my loneliness, please... send me a companion, a friend, a girlfriend, anyone... I just... need some company."

He stared out at the stars, sighing heavily and deciding that the idea was utterly ridiculous, he shut his window, turning back to the other side of his bed and reaching up to get a book from his nightstand, when all of a sudden a puff of purple smoke burst into the middle of his room

And when the smoke cleared, he saw.... a girl...

A short girl with dark hair and ... horns.... and wings....

All of a sudden, Jordan regretted wishing on that star....

"Who are you?" he asked slowly

The girl turned towards him, blinking with large blue eyes and grinning a fanged grin

"I'm Bella, you summoned me, it's nice to meet you,"

"Summoned...? How did I ... summon... anyone? I don't mess with that stuff,"

"Oh contraire, you wished upon a star for your loneliness to be no more didn't you? Well here I am,"

"I ... wished for a friend, you're a- ... what are you?"

"A succubus, but that's not important right now,"

"You're a SUCCUBUS?"

Surely he must have misheard that, succubi weren't real!

....

Of course

.....

She DID show up out of nowhere in a cloud of purple smoke ... and she did have horns and fangs and claws and wings... and..... was that a tail?

Please, tell him that wasn't a tail...

"Is that a tail?"

Bella looked down, the thin black ... thing... - he refused to call it a tail- swishing behind her

"Yeah that's my tail,"

... A tail....

"I don't understand," Jordan said bluntly

"What's to understand? I'm a succubus, I feed on romantic energy, you're lonely and you wishing on that star for your loneliness to go away brought me here,"

She said it so casually that Jordan was starting to think he was dreaming

"And no, you're not dreaming,"

Well that shot that theory down...

"Wait a second... first of all, wishing upon a star summoned some creature from another dimension instead of just bringing me a friend?"

"Funny how the universe works isn't it?"

"Second of all 'romantic energy'?"

"This is a family story, we're keeping it classy,"

At this point, he was about two seconds away from just getting up and Googling psychological wellness testing...

"What are you talking about!?"

"That isn't important right now," Bella repeated, stretching a little and rolling her shoulders, which incidentally caused one of her wings to knock over his stack of books on the desk by his closet

"... I can fix that," she assured him, bending down to start picking up the books

"I'm sorry I still can't get past the fact that I wished on a star and summoned a DEMON into my house," Jordan said bluntly, finally rolling out of bed and rubbing at his eyes, maybe this was all a delusion brought on by dehydration and lack of sleep....

"Hey, I am NOT a demon, ok buddy? I'm an Unseelie Faery,"

"And what in God's name is an 'Unseelie Faery'!?"

"You know, a dark faery, like succubi, phooka, goblins, redcaps- all of the creatures that the cutesy friendly 'light' fae folk don't want people to know about, honestly I've been annoyed with that for years, like just because I feed on human energy it doesn't make me a bad person, now redcaps.... redcaps are generally bad people, and I'm lumped into a classification with them, which is kind of ridiculous since the leanan

sidhe' are still considered Seelie Faeries in some circles when they do the SAME thing, I mean just because they provide creative muses doesn't-"

"You talk a lot," Jordan interrupted

Bella paused, pursing her lips and crossing her arms in annoyance

"And you're blonde, what's your point?"

He just groaned loudly, sitting down in his desk chair and rubbing his face tiredly

"I don't have a point anymore, I stopped having a point when a dem-"

"Un.Seelie. FAERY. We went over this,"

"-dark faery appeared in a cloud of smoke in my room!"

"Well would you have preferred I just appeared without the smoke? Because you know, usually that scares people,"

Oh sure, it was the lack of smoke that scared people, not the strange horned woman appearing suddenly in their houses

Jordan just groaned, shaking his head slowly, he could already feel his stomach ulcers acting up over this, he had never even had a girlfriend before, how was he supposed to deal with a succubus?!

"So... are you going to like.... eat me or something?" he asked slowly

"Well first of all I wouldn't eat YOU, just your energy, you're picturing some kind of sci-fi occult monster in the woods type of nonsense, I just drain your energy a little bit, make you tired mostly, you know like a psychic vampire or an energy parasite, you run into them all the time in places like schools, malls, other well populated places,"

"You aren't helping," Jordan groaned, rubbing his eyes again

"You keep doing that, are you tired?" Bella observed as she took a few steps towards him, tail swishing curiously behind her

"I'm a college student, I'm always tired, it's nothing new,"

"Really? Man I've gotten like six of those this week alone, you know you'd really think your education system would do something to PREVENT youth burnouts considering how many of them are running amuck out there forming dangerous addictions and codependency's or just flat-out dying,"

"You'd think," Jordan sighed, "But then again I'm looking at a dark faery and still persist that the government is the most evil thing I'm aware of,"

"Eh.... you're not wrong... I have a lot of cousins who know politicians pretty intimately," Bella shrugged back

Jordan just wrinkled his nose and hoped she wouldn't expand on that any, he already had a pretty low opinion of the higher ups of the world, he really didn't want to see that opinion drop any lower... if it could....

"So are you going to like.... feed on me now?" he asked curiously

Bella shrugged, going over to sit on the bed and leaning back to stretch out

"I mean... not unless you really want me to, I had a pretty big dinner, I'm not hungry,"

Jordan was just quiet for a moment, trying to process that

"Then why are you here...?"

She sighed loudly, turning to frown at him

"You. Wished. Upon. A. Star. Fae folk are in tune with nature, including the celestial forces like stars and the moon, we try to help humans when we can- well, the decent of us that is- I heard how lonely you were and it isn't like you were over here wishing specifically for some kind of summer love or something so I just figured... eh, I'm bored, why not?"

"You're here because you were bored?"

"Pretty much, my brother isn't home on our usual checkers night and that Saturday comedy show is a rerun so there's not a lot to do at eleven-thirty at night,"

"You feed on people's- to use your word- 'romantic' energy and you have nothing to do late on a Saturday night?"

"I already told you I'm not hungry, what would be the point in hunting down someone to feed on?"

That was it, he knew he was losing his mind now, because it WOULD be his delusional mind that would conjure up a succubus who didn't even want to feed on him

That was exactly the kind of self-loathing the public school system had instilled in him to have

But it was obvious that Bella wasn't going anywhere anytime soon and... well.... Jordan WAS lonely....

"Wanna play checkers?"

That perked the faery up and she sprung up, wings stretching out and fluttering happily, which wasn't the cute kind of pixie fluttering that he would see faeries in movies have, Bella's wings were thick, huge, and leathery, a lot like bat wings really, which fit her overall *~darkness~* motif a lot more than the little pixie wings would have he supposed

But... they were still kind of cute when they fluttered, even though the gust of wind it caused knocked him out of his chair

"I'm red!" she shouted

Jordan just shrugged, picking himself up from the floor and heading downstairs to go get the game

Playing checkers with a succubus.... he'd had worse Saturday nights he supposed

Of course, the funny part was that, that wasn't at all the last time Bella visited him

In fact she was starting to make it a nightly thing

They did all kinds of things from playing board games to watching movies to dissing the higher powers of the world

But ... she never once tried to feed on him, and other than that first night, Jordan never really asked why

They went on like that for two months, until Jordan went back to college that was

That's when things got... weird....

It was three in the morning when the phone started ringing, and after spending all day moving back into his dorm the last thing Jordan wanted to do was answer the phone

But every time it stopped ringing and went to voicemail it would only wait a matter of seconds before the ringing started again

Finally on the third round he picked up, annoyance clearly present in his voice as he picked up

"Hello?" he grunted into the phone

"Jordan!?"

"Mom?!"

That had him sitting up, worry filling his veins as he jolted into a more awakened state

If his mother was calling him at three in the morning something must surely be wrong

"Mom what's wrong!?"

"I think there's something in the house...."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean I think there's something... HAUNTING... the house..."

"...Haunting...?"

"There are strange noises coming from upstairs but when we go to check it out the upstairs is empty, the lights keep flickering on and off, the TV is staticy, I've seen those haunting movies Jordan, I know what this means!"

"Mom-"

"And it started the moment you left!"

"Mom, just-"

"Jordan, baby, you know you can trust me, you know I'll never hate you but... were you messing with the occult when you were home over the summer?"

"What!? Mom no!"

"Well I just had to check..."

"Mom just... I'll be right there ok? I'll just... be there in a second, just sit tight alright?"

Jordan didn't know what was going on but it was more than a little unnerving...

He quickly said his goodbyes to his mother and hung up, hurrying to get his keys and the baseball bat he kept under the bed for protection before rushing out of the dorm without even bothering to change out of his pajamas

He was just lucky that he only lived an hour away from home....

When he got back to his old house he was surprised to see his mother standing on the lawn, clearly distressed as his father tried to pull her back into the house

"Oh Jordan thank goodness you're here!" she shouted

"Mom-"

She didn't even let him finish talking, slamming into him in a tight hug the second he was out of the car

"I'm sorry about all of this son, you know your mother," his father said with a heavy sigh

"Well can you explain what's going on then Norbert!?" his mother shouted

Jordan just shook his head, grabbing his baseball bat out of the back of the car and stalking into the house

"Just stay here ok? I'll figure out what's going on,"

"Be careful son, and if you hear any Latin jump out of a window!" his mother shouted from the bottom of the stairs

Jordan just sighed, wondering if his entire family should take psychological testing online as he marched up the stairs

He was surprised to see that there might actually be basis for his mother's claims, there was a light on in his room that he could see from the crack under the door...

Swallowing, he raised his baseball bat and slowly opened the door, preparing to swing the bat down on an intruder when he suddenly paused, mouth falling open when he spotted....

None other than Bella, laying on his bed eating a bowl of cherries and flipping through a magazine

"Where the heck have you been?" she asked casually

"I've been at college!! Why are you in my house!?" he shouted back

"Ughhhhh you went BACK to that soul-sucking institution?"

"You are a succubus, you LITERALLY suck souls, what are you criticizing?"

"Yeah but I mean, at least I do it out of necessity, schools just do it because it's fun," she shrugged back

Jordan just sighed, dropping the bat and going to sit down on his desk chair

"You scared my mother half to death," he pointed out

"Oh.... sorry," she frowned, sitting up and wiping her hands off on her dress

"You know for a frightening, soul sucking, seductress of the underworld you aren't very convincing..."

"I'm not from the underworld, for the last time I'm from the FAERY world, God..."

"Still though... you'd think you'd be like... a LITTLE more intimidating..."

Bella just shrugged, slipping off the bed and stretching a little

"Well, I better go apologize to your mom,"

"You can't go down there like that! My forty-six-year-old CATHOLIC mother will have a heart attack!"

"I'm not going down like THIS," she said with a roll of her eyes, snapping her fingers as her horns, tail, fangs, and claws all disappeared

Even her red and black gothic dress disappeared, replaced with a basic yellow blouse and long skirt, short pink fingernails, and even her hair in a long braid....

"Better? Pretty snazzy huh?"

"You look ridiculous, and you STILL can't go downstairs, what do you think my parents will think if a girl has been waiting on me in my room all night?"

"Then what do YOU suggest?"

"I'll just make up something, faulty fuse or something else ridiculous,"

She shrugged, snapping her fingers and going back to her usual motif and crashing back on the bed with her cherries

"Cool cool, you'll come upstairs and tell me where you live so I can keep visiting then," she shrugged

"Yes Ma'am," he grumbled, halfway to the door when he paused suddenly and looked over his shoulder

"Wait a second why can't you just like... psychically find out where I am?"

"Because I didn't put a tracker under your skin? What, you think that just because we can sometimes read minds we have some kind of magical trackers on you or something? I'd have to implant one under your skin and honestly I'm pretty crappy with a scalpel so... you might want to avoid that,"

Jordan just sighed, wondering what had become of his life as he trekked downstairs...

But things seemed to work out at least, Bella was back to visiting him every night and they were having a pretty good time

Everything was somehow somewhat normal... until one night in late September...

"Honestly I don't even know what to make of this, how are those two not a couple yet? They've been dancing around each other for seven seasons and it's starting to get stupid,"

"I know," Jordan shrugged, reaching into the bowl and frowning as he found it utterly empty

"You ate all the popcorn again..." he muttered, sighing as he got up and went over to the mini fridge

"Sorry boo," Bella muttered back, licking her fingers and perking up as Jordan brought back a plate of mini sandwiches

"It's fine, I anticipated this, but you should seriously start paying half my grocery bill, I'm a poor college student as it is and you're eating me out of house and home," he said as he put the plate down

She reached immediately for a little sandwich square, tearing into it as if she was trying to separate meat from bone

It was at that moment that he actually noticed how sharp and ... ferocious... those fangs were

It was more than a little concerning

What did she even HAVE those for?

"Sorry, I'll buy you dinner tomorrow OK? Promise, anywhere you want,"

"Fine," Jordan sighed back, it wasn't grocery money but Bella was taking him to dinner once or twice a week on average now which he definitely couldn't afford on his own so it evened out, five nights of ramen and popcorn, two nights of actual dinner, it balanced out

"I'm serious though, what, are you succubi bottomless pits or something? Where does it all GO?"

Bella just shrugged back, reaching for another sandwich

Jordan in the meantime was in the middle of grabbing a bottle of soda from the mini fridge when he saw a familiar plume of smoke out of the corner of his eye

But instead of purple, this one was black...

Turning around immediately, he dropped his can of soda when he saw another Unseelie Faery in his room, but this one wasn't a succubus, it was an incubus... and a very familiar looking one at that....

"CHARLIE!?"

There, standing in the middle of the room, was Charlie....

His roommate and best friend for the last three years

"Uh-oh," Charlie muttered

"You two know each other?" Bella asked in confusion

"Bella!?" Charlie shouted as he looked down

It was in that moment that Jordan started noticing something about Charlie and Bella....

Black hair, blue eyes, similar jawlines...

"Oh don't tell me you two are-"

"Siblings," Bella and Charlie said at once

Jordan snapped his mouth shut

"How do you two know each other?" Bella asked in confusion

"We're roommates, how do YOU two know each other?" Charlie huffed back

"We're friends, it's kind of a long story," Bella shrugged back

There was a short, awkward silence before Jordan spoke again

"So..... is this why you somehow magically always have a date?"

"Yeah," Charlie said with a dreamy sigh

Bella just rolled her eyes, shaking her head slowly

"Why are you two up so late anyway? Usually when I get home you're already asleep," the incubus observed

"We're binge-watching the last season of that vampire show," Bella shrugged back, grabbing another sandwich

Charlie watched, looking kind of confused before reaching down and grabbing one for himself

Jordan rolled his eyes

Great, now he had two of them, buy groceries

"You just ate, you CAN'T still be hungry," Bella accused

"I can eat! I can ALWAYS eat," Charlie huffed back

"If you do you're just going to get a stomachache," she sighed back, sawing through the next sandwich square like a shark chowing down on a fish

"I. Can ALWAYS. Eat!" Charlie argued, wrinkling his nose and suddenly turning towards Jordan, smirking and swaying forward as he set a hand on Jordan's shoulder

"As a matter of fact, if you-"

"Don't even think about it Charlie,"

"What?"

"I'm not interested,"

Charlie rolled his eyes, batting his eyes and tilting his head

"Oh come on Jordan, I know you wa-" he paused, coughing a little and wincing as he put a hand over his mouth

"Ah... heartburn...." he muttered

"Real attractive," Jordan muttered back, shaking out of Charlie's grip and heading back over to where Bella was snickering on the floor

"I told you, you can't eat anymore, you have like, three meals a day,"

"THREE?" Jordan asked in shock, mouth falling open

How were there even that many people in town...?

"Yeah well... we all have our tastes, you got any antacid?"

"Bathroom," Jordan muttered back, shaking his head as he watched Charlie scramble for the bathroom

Honestly there was no sadder sight than an incubus stumbling off with his tail between his legs (literally) groaning from indigestion

"My brother has always been an overeater, you should have known him when he was a teenager, he tried to have two werewolves in one day once, let me tell you something- BAD idea, werewolves are like the MASTERS of stamina, we energy eaters avoid them like the plague unless we're like... starving or fasting or something, fastest way on the planet to get a stomachache, try to feed on a werewolf."

"I'm JUST starting to get used to the faery thing, don't start putting werewolves on me," Jordan frowned

Bella just shrugged, frowning when she found the sandwich squares gone

"Jordy~~... do you have any more food?" she asked with a pout, wings sagging and eyes batting up at him

He sighed loudly, walking over to the cabinet and sighing

"I have ramen,"

"Teriyaki?"

"Beef,"

"Oh... ehh.... I really only like teriyaki..."

"They haven't made that in like ten years..."

"Really? Oh, wow... huh... got anything else?"

"Macaroni and cheese?"

"Yes please!!"

Jordan shook his head, grabbing a box from the cabinet and pausing as he set it down

"Wait a second, if your brother is about to toss his cookies from overeating then how are YOU still plowing through the chow like a shark on a bad day?"

Bella shrugged, hopping up to her feet and brushing off her dress

"I don't know, hormone imbalance? Fast metabolism? You know what we should do? Get pizza, I'll pay,"

"It's two in the morning, no one is open," he sighed

"I beg to differ!" Bella shouted

"It's because she isn't eating properly," Charlie mused as he stepped out of the bathroom, a bottle of chewable antacids in his hand

"What?" Jordan frowned, watching as Charlie munched down another cherry flavored tablet

"I said she's not eating right, she only eats like once a day- sometimes less- so she's chowing down on human food trying to fill the void,"

Bella growled, wings twitching in irritation as she hopped to her feet and snatched the bottle out of his hand

"Stop eating these like candy before you make your stomach worse,"

"But they taste good..."

"That's your problem! Everything tastes good to you and you have to please that ever important palette! Last week you just came back from a meal, see some librarian walk down the street and next thing you know you're eating four times a day, it's ridiculous!"

"Can we get back to the 'Bella isn't eating right' thing?" Jordan groaned, glancing at his clock and sighing as he realized that he wasn't going to get any sleep tonight

"Yeah, for the last couple of months she hasn't been feeding at night at all and now I know why, you're keeping her from getting a full meal, you know it's harder to find food before ten o'clock,"

Jordan frowned, looking over at Bella and tilting his head in confusion

"Why have you been wasting your nights on me then? If you're not feeding right..."

"It doesn't matter, I'm getting enough," she shrugged back

"Yeah after supplementing with human food like crazy,"

She heaved a sigh, turning to her brother and shoving the bottle of antacid back at him

"You know what, on second thought, go in the hall and eat your candy-medicine,"

Charlie just gave her a thumbs up, heading to the door and grabbing a chocolate bar on his way out

"He has a problem," Bella muttered, tossing her hair over her shoulder

"He's not the only one, you really have been missing out on meals because you want to spend time with me?"

"Well... you're busy during the day, nighttime is the only time I can hang out with you.. besides, if I get desperate I just hop a few continents over, it's always nighttime somewhere," she shrugged back, sitting down on Jordan's bed and wringing her hands

"Yeah but... I don't want you to get hungry because of me..."

She shook her head, raking a strand of hair behind her ear

"I'm really not, just because SOME energy eaters overdo it like Charlie does, doesn't mean we have to gorge ourselves, I promise I'm healthy enough, if I wasn't I would just go hunting after our little playdates," she explained

Jordan was quiet, sitting down next to her and rubbing the back of his neck

"You know... I could just stay up later,"

"No you need to sleep, college is running you ragged as it is,"

He nodded slowly, rubbing the back of his neck and smiling shyly at her

"You know... if you ever want to... you could always just...."

"Just...?"

"I like you Bella, more than I've ever liked anyone,"

Bella smiled shyly at him, nodding slowly

"I like you more than I've ever liked anyone too." she said softly, leaning over and giving him a gentle kiss on the cheek

"But I still don't want to drain you too much, school is already doing that enough as it is,"

"Better than draining my bank account, which is exactly what you'll be doing if you keep swallowing sandwiches like M&Ms," Jordan teased with a laugh

Bella didn't get the chance to respond, unfortunately, as a knock on the door interrupted them

"Guys.... I forgot my key!"

Jordan just heaved a heavy sigh, shaking his head

"How did my social life end up revolving around Unseelie Faeries?"

Bella grinned, standing up to get the door and patting Jordan on the shoulder

"When you wish upon a star...."

The Veil

Once upon a time

In a land that remains very far, yet somehow very close to this one

There lived a Water Nymph

But this is not about the Water Nymph

This is about the person who met the Water Nymph many years ago

This is about a girl from our own world who once thought herself human, and quickly came to realize, that this was not so

This girl's name was Harlow

And once upon a time, she thought she was truly nothing special

Her life was very normal, too much so in fact

Harlow always ached for something more

For something that was different from this same mundane reality she suffered in

She craved magic and everything that came with it

And she believed in magic

With all of her heart and soul she believed in magic

The people around her, however, did not

For the world that Harlow lived in was one full of skepticism and hatred and would not acknowledge the other world or the fact that there might be something out there beyond humanity

And no matter how positive Harlow remained on her beliefs, she was often faced with the fact that people didn't believe along with her, and in fact, many cruelly shot her down

They said terrible things

That she was crazy or childish for believing in such things

But she tried not to care

And one day her strong beliefs were rewarded

For one day, as she walked along the edge of the fountain, she saw something rather strange in the waters below

It was a beautiful, shimmering thing, and when she entered the water to retrieve it, she found herself in an entirely different world

A world so very different from the world she came from

One without chaos and strife

One full of beauty and simplicity

One that many people call the faery realm

And Harlow was in love at first sight

She found soon that stepping into water in the faery world brought a similar response and she ended up back in her world upon entering a lake there the day after her arrival

As she also soon discovered, it wasn't just any particular place or type of water she had to step into in order to become part of the other world

Any body of water would do, no matter how big or small no matter if it was natural or man-made, no matter at all

And so this became quite a thing for Harlow

To travel between worlds every day or two

She met people in the faery realm who she very much cherished, people she could really call her friends

And then there was Marin

Perhaps her first friend in the faery realm

Marin was a Water Nymph, so she naturally resided in water

It was really no wonder why she happened to meet Marin before anyone else

In fact if we're posing questions, it may be far more important to wonder why it took her as long as it did to meet Marin in the first place

But that was just another wonderful thing about Marin, the mystery about her

The two of them bonded quickly and became so close that they could put twins to shame

The only time they were apart was when Harlow had to go back and visit her own world, the trips to which were becoming increasingly short and sparing

For as she was finding out, the human world could be a toxic place, and she much preferred the delightful peace of the faery realm

Especially when she stumbled across the fact that she was a witch

That really changed things

She spent less and less time in the human world

She spent more and more time in the faery realm with people she cared about and people who cared about her as well

And she trained herself

She honed her gift

She became a very talented young witch

But there was still a problem

The more time she spent in the faery realm and the less time she spent in the human world, the more people asked questions and became increasingly suspicious of everything

They called it worry but Harlow suspected it was something else entirely, worry didn't look like this, she knew from experience

She had a feeling it was far less about worry and far more about trying to put her in one of the boxes that human society so insisted upon using

And she wasn't happy about it

But at the same time she didn't want to just give up her life as she knew it

She didn't want to give up her humanity

And because she still identified partly as human, she tried to live that way as well

She tried to live on the border of a human and a witch

On the border of the human realm and the faery realm

On the border of harshness and peace

But no matter what she did, she kept seeming to tilt one way or another

And because people were so relentless, she had a time of tilting towards the human world

A time where it was many days before she returned to the faery realm

A time when she tried to do as the humans wished and be "more involved" with life in "reality"

Even if it pained her greatly to do so

But she got through it, missing a few pieces, but still

And when finally she deemed it the right time to return to the faery realm, she ran towards the lake, jumped in and.... sank

Like a rock

Utterly confused, she climbed out of the lake and ran towards the other end

But the same thing happened

She tried water after water and still nothing acted even remotely unusual

And finally, her last stop, her last CHANCE....

The fountain that had started it all

She took a breath, started to run, and-

Was stopped suddenly by Marin's appearance

"Marin? What are you doing here?" she asked in confusion and surprise

"I came to warn you, the glitch that had caused doorways to open up in all of the water sources has been resolved, the veil is thickening again, and soon you won't be able to get through it," she explained

"I don't understand... what does that mean for me?" Harlow asked worriedly

'It means that you will no longer be able to travel between worlds at your leisure, the veil will still be thin enough on occasion for you to cross over between worlds, but not nearly as often as it is now, you must make a choice, do you want to stay here in the human realm and live as a human, or come back to the faery realm and live as a witch? Know that no matter what your choice is, I will understand it," she smiled

Harlow had to think about that for a moment

It was a decision she had never wanted to have to make

She had always wanted things to stay as they were

Delightfully split down the middle

Half human, half witch

Half human realm, half faery realm

One half of herself, and then the other half as well

But she understood that this privilege she had was just that- a mere privilege, and it was not going to last forever

It was never meant to last at all in fact

And so, with that in mind, her decision was made

She took a deep breath, magic pulsing through every vein, and took Marin's hand as she allowed the Water Nymph to help her onto the edge of the fountain

She gave one last look to her human life and mourned it, for although she had loved it deeply once before and had loved herself as a human once before, everything changes

And this is no different

Change is not always a bad thing, and as Harlow descended into the faery realm with Marin by her side, she came to another realization

Sometimes you have to make choices and pick sides, choose one thing you love over another

But even if you move away from who you used to be, live in a new home, wear a new wardrobe, become a new person...

The person you were is not just a memory

They're every bit a part of you as any other part

The person you WERE helps to make up the person you ARE now

So even if you have to leave part of yourself behind, as Harlow discovered, that part will always find a way to remain with you

For you cannot be who you are without first coming to accept who you once were

The Very Anxious Hedgehog

Once upon a time

In a land filled with magic

There lived a hedgehog

She wasn't any ordinary hedgehog, however

She was a hedgehog shape shifter

Some called her a were-hedgehog but that wasn't quite right

Some tried to call her a familiar or a shape shifter but those weren't quite right either

She didn't know quite what she was, so she merely called herself Amelia- for Amelia was her name

The problem was that Amelia was a very anxious person

And when she got anxious or scared or upset, even in her human form, her quills came out

And since no one wanted to be poked by these unfriendly quills, Amelia went without the one thing she had always wanted: A comforting hug

Even worse than that though, Amelia came to the conclusion early on that she would never be blessed enough to fall in love

After all, who would love someone they couldn't even be near?

These thoughts only made Amelia sadder and sadder, and brought her quills out more and more

It seemed to her that she was destined to live a life full of loneliness

That is, until one day when she met someone very special

It was an average day, and like most average days Amelia found herself in a ball of upset as anxiety coursed through her and forced her quills forth

She had just been reminded once again of the impending spring dance that her best friend Robin held every year, and like most years, Amelia found the subject quite stressing

Amelia really wasn't the best with social interaction, parties being one of the lowest points of her social scale, but she felt obligated to be there considering everything that Robin did for her

Her friend was only trying to help by encouraging Amelia to come out of her shell but she couldn't help feeling even worse about it the more Robin reminded her

And so she sat there, in the middle of the field, sobbing sadly and picking up a flower to start chewing on

"Is everything alright?" she heard, tensing and feeling her quills spike out even more as she looked up

Standing in front of her was a young man, perfectly human looking, and ... perfectly concerned looking as well

"I'm... I'm sorry... I'm not feeling very well," she mumbled, picking another flower to chew up

"I'm so sorry to hear that, is there anything I can do to help?" he asked, sitting down beside her

She shook her head, curling up and ducking her head into her arms

"No, I'm just... just anxious,"

"Really? Mind if I ask why?"

She shuddered, tensing a bit and frowning more

"I really don't want to impose..."

"It's no imposition, I promise,"

Amelia stared at him with uncertainty but, figuring she had nothing to lose, sighed and started to explain the situation to him

"I'm not a very social person, I'm... actually very socially anxious... my friend is having her yearly spring party next week and I feel obligated to go even though I won't want to,"

He frowned, seeming sympathetic, and nodded slowly

"I'm so sorry to hear that, you do realize, however, that you don't ACTUALLY have to go?"

"But I feel like I do, she's my best friend, she does so much for me and all she wants in return is what's best for me,"

"But there's a difference between coming out of your comfort zone to rid yourself of your limitations, and just entering into a stressful situation that won't resolve anything, which one do you think this is?"

Amelia picked another flower, thinking back to the last several years and all of the parties Robin had thrown and all of the social events she had been to and how none of them had ever even felt remotely decent no matter how many she seemed to attend or wade through

"I don't think it's good," she relented a moment later

"Then may I suggest simply not going? Wait until you're a little more adjusted, until you can feel better about social situations, I think you should wait until you can feel a difference, until you feel better about the idea and can get through normal interactions, and when you feel like you can handle those a little better then you can look into going to a party, stretching your wings a little you know?"

Amelia stared up at the advice giving man in front of her, surprise rippling through her

No one had ever said anything like that to her before...

"Who are you?" she asked in confusion

"Huh? Oh, I'm Caleb, it's nice to meet you, and you are?" he asked with a small smile

"Amelia,"

"Amelia, what a nice name," he smiled more, reaching closer and shaking her hand without hesitation

Amelia's mouth opened in shock when he did so and yet didn't seem to mind the spines that would prick most people

In fact, Caleb didn't seem bothered by them at all

"Don't you mind? My... you know... quills? Don't they hurt?" she asked in confusion

Caleb stared at her, laughing lightly and shaking his head

"Well I'm sure to normal people they might but I'm not quite a normal person,"

"Then what are you?" Amelia pressed in fascination

Caleb smiled more, flexing his fingers as a ripple effect went through his skin and it became more of a light grey- and became as firm and solid as stone

"A ... gargoyle?" she guessed in surprise

"Yep, that's right, as you can imagine your quills really don't bother me," he grinned, leaning closer and knocking quietly on the ground- sure enough, no matter how hard he tapped or knocked on the ground, his hands were entirely unaffected

"So... my quills really don't bother you," she breathed in fascination

Caleb smiled gently at her and nodded

"That's right,"

Amelia was amazed- completely and utterly amazed

Finally it seemed that someone really COULD be near her, could hug her and be with her, without getting hurt

Well that is, if he wanted

"Um... Caleb?" she asked suddenly as she grabbed another flower

"Yeah?" he asked curiously

"Can I... well... that is, if you don't mind... is there any way you could um..."

"Yes...?"

"Can I have a hug?" She finally blurted out

Caleb smiled, seeming delighted and nodded

"Of course, no one ever asks me for hugs- my body is always too hard and stiff,"

"Well... surprisingly no one ever seems happy to hug me either," she teased slightly

"I'm quite surprised by that indeed," he laughed, leaning over and wrapping his arms around her

Amelia beamed, hugging him tightly and feeling the wonderful sensation of a warm, comforting hug for the first time in her life

And much to her surprise, as the warm sensation flooded through her and she felt herself calm and relaxed, her quills sank back into her skin like they were supposed to, leaving her perfectly- well, quill-less!

This, Amelia decided half-way through the most wonderfully warm and heavy hug she had ever had, was the beginning of a beautiful relationship

The Very Special Vet

Once upon a time

In a land within close proximity to our own

There lived a vet named Laurie

A vet technician to be exact

The reason Laurie was so special wasn't just because of her patients- although there weren't very many vets out there who specialized in the supernatural- but it was because of her personality

Laurie was kind and gentle and most of all open-hearted, listening to everyone's individual needs and concerns and never brushing anyone off for their beliefs not aligning with what could be found in a common medical book

It may not sound like much upon first hearing it but it meant a lot to her patients

It became especially useful in those very specific circumstances when confidentiality was a must

Like now, for example, when a very prominent werewolf clan was at her door

"Ah Mr. Hathaway, to what do I owe the pleasure? The full moon isn't even for a week," Laurie said with a soft smile

The large man- no smaller than six feet tall- sighed and ran his fingers through his hair

"My brother got himself in trouble with another witch," he said slowly, rubbing the back of his neck and glaring over at the small group of four sitting on the bench in the waiting room

Nothing close to the entire pack, she observed, just the siblings of the Alpha

"Shouldn't you be seeing a doctor about this?" she asked slowly

The man gave a quick shake of his head

"No, unfortunately, the spell only affected his.... wolf..."

"And what exactly did Luke do to upset this witch?" she asked with a small frown

"Not Luke... Gabe," he sighed heavily

Laurie's eyebrows rose

Now that was a new one

She was considerably used to seeing Luke for his ... multiple witch related offenses....

The boy was trouble walking- never seeming to have grown out of those troubled teenager years that should have passed half a decade ago

But Gabe... he was a gentle and soft-spoken soul who shook like a Chihuahua at the thought of hurting someone's feelings or otherwise upsetting them

She couldn't imagine Gabe having done... well... anything

"We'll talk in a private room, do you have a moment?" the Alpha asked quietly

Laurie looked around, noting that there didn't seem to be any immediate rush going on

There was a centaur in room 3B getting one of his back legs patched but other than that...

"Room 5A seems free," she offered, smiling gently and waving them over to the room furthest away from the door

Surely enough, the entire pack of siblings followed, only Gabe and the Alpha actually heading into the exam room with Luke and their sisters guarding the door outside like a menacing force of nature

Ah werewolves, no matter how many times Laurie worked with them she never quite would stop being amused with the fact that every little thing was treated with more security than the president probably had on a daily basis...

"So what did Gabe DO exactly to upset this witch?" she asked as she went over to dim the lights

No one liked bright lights but werewolves were especially sensitive to them

"Oh NO, it was DEFINITELY Luke that did the deed, crushed her herb garden and uprooted her favorite rose bush in an.... ill planned wooing attempt that I promise you don't want the details of,"

He was right, Laurie definitely didn't want the details of that

"Gabe just ended up paying the price,"

"I was in the way," the younger wolf supplied anxiously

"Alright.... do you want to tell me what's wrong then?" she asked gently, setting a folder down on the exam table and starting to look for a pen

"This is off the record, obviously, but... go ahead and show her Gabe,"

"Cayden are you sure?"

"Show the nice vet Gabe," Cayden insisted once more

The younger wolf heaved a deep sigh and took off his shoes and jacket, his brother collecting them dutifully and setting them in the chair next to them

With one more nod from the Alpha the werewolf closed his eyes and the familiar glow of shape shifting encompassed his body

.... And Laurie saw EXACTLY why this needed to be kept off the record (and promptly cleared the file out of the way)

Instead of a wolf standing before her.... it was a Yorkie

A tiny, black and tan Yorkie, no bigger than her two hands cupped together

She was in stunned silence for the time being but Cayden didn't seem the least bit perturbed, picking up the tiny dog and placing him on the table as if it were the most serious thing in the world

And to them it must be

Dignity was important to werewolves, despite what the lack of table manners and frequent nudity would suggest, and their most dignified moment was always when they gave fully into the raw power of nature and shape shifted into a wolf

For that strong and mighty wolf to become little more than a fluffy purse dog was humiliating for anyone

But for the younger brother of the Alpha- who already had trouble gaining respect due to his gentle, emotional nature- it was downright risky

The other werewolves would probably have enough respect to let sleeping dogs lie but other species were likely not going to be as understanding

"I see," she finally managed to say

"Tell me there's a way to fix this," Cayden stressed

Laurie rubbed the back of her neck, she had never exactly seen anything like this before...

"Well..." she muttered under her breath

"Is there nothing we can do?" he asked worriedly

Gabe started to whimper and flitter around the table as if running in circles would help- spoiler alert: It didn't

"Did the witch give you no indication of how to break the spell?"

"Frankly we're lucky she gave us no indication of breaking Luke's neck," the Alpha sighed lowly

"You might want to consider a tighter leash for him,"

"I'm starting to wonder if I should consider putting him down, that boy is going to drive me into an early grave! ... Or an insane asylum...."

"Maybe it's a little early to start thinking about that, let's just focus on Gabe," she suggested, staring down at the little dog

"He's been like this for over a week, surely you understand he can't go on the pack run like this next week,"

"No no I understand, I'm just thinking," she considered, tapping her chin a bit as she stared down at the were-Yorkie on her table

"I wonder... what kind of magic was it?" she asked

"What do you mean what kind?"

"Well... a spell, a potion, a charm...? Was it a powder or-"

"A powder yes, she had a bag of powder on her hip and tossed a palm of it forward and chanted something or other, is that right Gabey?"

Gabe turned and gave his head an enthusiastic nod

"Ah, NOW we're getting somewhere!" Laurie smiled, snapping her fingers

"Are we?"

"Was the powder baby pink and rose scented?"

Gabe gave another nod, starting to bark in approval

"I thought as much, that's an all-purpose spell powder, directed for cases when the witch isn't quite sure what to do or doesn't have time to get creative, she tosses the powder and it does the work for her, once she decides on a spell she merely has to think of the consequences and apply those at a later date, at her convenience, then it'll take effect,"

"I see... and what do we do to get this powder spell gone?"

Laurie smiled, scribbling something on a sheet of paper

"Just a bath- in this form- with some special shampoo will work, the powder is likely still matted up in his fur, once the powder is gone, so too will be a spell," she explained

"I see... well I think that's rather doable," he agreed

"Good, I'll get the shampoo for you outside," she smiled, waving him to the door

"Deal, Gabe- you just stay here and uh... get fixed up,"

The tiny creature gave a squeak in lieu of a confirmation and Cayden just gave him a thumb's up as they walked out of the exam room

"Thank you so much for this Laurie, it really does mean a lot, especially since you won't be making anyone else aware of this,"

Laurie just gave another gentle smile and headed for the counter

"Don't mention it- seriously,"

She laughed slightly, starting to type through the computer to look for the medicated shampoo

"Where's Melissa?" she heard, glancing up and noticing that the wolves were in fact missing a sister

"Dakota did you let her-"

"I didn't LET her do anything, she is actually her own person," Dakota said with a frustrated look

Before anything else could be said or done, a loud yelp followed by a high-pitched scream echoed from somewhere in one of the other rooms and the door slammed open as a half-turned were-cat ran into the lobby in only his jeans

"Stay away from me Wolf!" he shouted, hopping over the counter and cowering behind Laurie

Sure enough, a moment later the aforementioned werewolf stalked out like a predator, eyes already blazing gold as she peered over the counter

"Here Kitty Kitty~" she growled lowly

"Mel!! Stop terrorizing the cat!" Cayden huffed as Gabe stepped out of the room and fidgeted anxiously

"But... so cute.... I love it when kitties are scared," she cooed

"Well that's what Tom And Jerry is for Miss Hathaway," Laurie said coolly, not minding the were-cat curled around her legs as she started searching behind the counter for the shampoo

He was scratching slightly at her legs from nerves but she didn't really mind, it wasn't even as bad as most actual cats

"What a shame..." Melissa sighed as Laurie set the shampoo on the counter

"It isn't that much of a loss," Cayden said with an eye roll

Before Laurie could speak up about anything else, however, she felt a tap on her shoulder and looked behind her to see one of the nurses leaning over

"Sorry to bother you, I just thought I'd let you know that Joanie Ashton brought her deer in for a splinter in the hoof,"

"Oh yes... the Familiar right?" Laurie asked

The vague sound of a crash echoed around them and suddenly she heard "LUKE NO!!" in the deep bellowing voice of an Alpha

If the howling blur that rushed past her was any indication, he hadn't listened

Sighing lowly, she reached beside her and grabbed the big net they kept there for times like these

It was just an average day as far as Laurie was concerned

The Well-Mannered Tanuki

Once upon a time

In a small cottage worlds and worlds away

There lived a human

He was a simple human, but unusually, he lived in the faery world

It was unusual due to the fact that typically, Fae Folk don't like humans living in their realm, they were so disruptive and frustrating and entitled

But not this human

This human, named Bill, was different

He was exceptionally well-mannered and peaceful and didn't bother the other creatures of the realm, so when he wandered in one day they had left him alone and allowed him to stay

It had been years now but Bill had no real desire to become a Fae himself, he rather enjoyed being human, it was ... well... peaceful

And he had more than adjusted to life in a world of supernatural creatures

Why, just tonight in fact he was in the middle of making dinner when he heard a loud and rambunctious howling coming from next door

Ah well, it was to be expected, werewolves after all, they had a tendency to do that

It didn't bother Bill though, not in the least, after all it was in their nature and he had grown more than accustomed to dealing with supernatural folks and their various oddities

However, there were some creatures who Bill would never quite get used to, one of which being tanuki

For you see, tanuki are rather mischievous little creatures. trickster spirits who liked to disrupt peace and create chaos

Bill didn't have much care for trickster spirits of any sort, but the kind such as tanuki or brownies were perhaps the most irritating as they tended to invade the home

No matter though, there weren't any trickster spirits in the area so there was no reason to be concerned

Or at least... that's what he thought...

However, unfortunately, Bill was wrong- very wrong

He didn't even notice as he went upstairs to reorganize his bookshelf that the downstairs window had been left cracked open, and unattended open windows were never good news in the faery world

Surely enough, within only a few moments of his leaving, a plump tanuki climbed through the window and landed right in Bill's living room

The tanuki sniffed around, looking over the space and searching through just about everything he could find

It was then that he noticed the smell of food and immediately scurried into the kitchen, making his way towards the oven when he heard a shout of "Hey!" and turned around

And there was Bill, standing in the hall with a frown

"Did you make that mess in the living room?" he asked

The tanuki sat up, clearing his throat and smiling

"Not at all, that was the squirrel,"

"What squirrel?"

"THE squirrel,"

"WHAT squirrel?"

"All of the squirrels,"

"There was no squirrel!"

"Really? ... Huh, must have been my imagination..." he muttered, opening the oven and grabbing a pair of oven mitts- even though they were at least ten times bigger than his little paws- and slipped the pan of lasagna out

"Well good day to you," he said, waddling as quickly as he could- which was not very quickly on only two stubby feet- towards the door

"No! No, NOT 'good day to you', you cannot just come in my home, destroy my living space, and take my food," Bill protested

The tanuki stared at him, as if utterly surprised by this revelation, before setting the lasagna down on the floor next to him and slipping off the mittens

"You're a very clean, organized, peaceful person aren't you Human?"

Bill nodded slowly, shifting his weight a bit

"Yes, yes I am,"

"Hm... no no, no that cannot be," the tanuki said with a frown, climbing onto the kitchen counter

"What do you mean by that?" Bill frowned, glaring at him as the tanuki scurried up closer and fetched something out of the pocket of his vest (why a tanuki was wearing a vest was beyond Bill but he had seen stranger)

"I mean that in this world, you HAVE to be a bit mischievous," the tanuki winked, tossing a handful of some strange powder forward and allowing it to cascade down over the human

Bill coughed slightly, trying to shake it off and blinking his eyes open only to find that his kitchen had become... extraordinarily much bigger...

He heard a beaming sound of laughter and looked up, seeing that the counter was much higher than it was before and atop it still rested the tanuki

"Why did you enlarge my house Tanuki!?" Bill shouted

"I did no such thing! If you want to know what happened to you, I suggest finding yourself a mirror!"

And with that, the tanuki vanished

Frowning to himself, Bill looked over to see that yes, indeed, the lasagna had gone with him

"Vermin..." he sighed, walking towards the bathroom

He wasn't sure what the tanuki had meant by finding a mirror but this was the only mirror he could think of on the second level of the house

Admittedly, it was no easy task climbing up on the bathroom counter, there was much finagling involved, but he eventually got up there

Sighing in frustration, he toddled over to the mirror and looked in

But all he saw was the tanuki

Crossing his arms over his chest he- .... saw the reflection also cross its arms over its chest....

Narrowing his eyes, he scratched his head... and the reflection scratched its head....

Gulping, he looked down at his hands... and saw two little paws in their place

Even the werewolves next door heard the volume of his screaming

For days Bill didn't know what to do with himself

Tanuki were so different from humans- and more importantly, so different from Bill!

It was bad enough that he was stuck in this little animal body- of which he knew nothing about- and struggled to get around his house, but he was also now stuck in the body of a shape shifting trickster, meaning that he had magical powers with no idea how to control them

He had such little control over anything now and it was truly upsetting, he had no idea how he was going to get used to this... at least... not until three days later....

He was in the middle of trying to adjust his book light so that he could read the novel he had started when all of a sudden he heard a crashing sound downstairs

Jerking his head up, he climbed to his feet again and wandered down the hall, cringing at the stairs

The idea of going down those things head first this close to the ground still made him queasy.... so he turned around and started climbing down them backwards, it was really only logical

Upon rounding the corner, he found before him two water spirits, one was a water nymph, and the other was a selkie

"We've been caught!" The selkie shouted, pulling on her nymph-friend's arm

"Calm down Elise, it's just a tanuki," the nymph shrugged

"Tanuki can be dangerous."

The two exchanged glances, then looked down at Bill, who sat rather patiently in front of them

"Oh yeah, I'm quaking in my boots, didn't we come here looking for fish?" she replied

"I don't have any fish," Bill said immediately

"We have to at least look or your clan will be mad at you for laying in the sun all day again," the nymph continued, as if Bill had said nothing at all

"True..." the selkie relented, starting towards the kitchen

"But I HAVE no fish!" Bill protested, racing after them as fast as a tanuki could race

The nymph and the selkie seemed to ignore him though, walking towards his freezer

Now Bill was telling the truth, he really DIDN'T have any fish, but he DID have some absolutely delicious Italian Ice and he was NOT going to let them take that away like the tanuki had taken his lasagna!

With a huff and an extra push in his steps, Bill toddled on until he was standing right in front of the girls

"Stop right there!" he demanded

The girls looked down at him, eyebrows raised and frowning

"No offense but... what are you going to do about it?" the water nymph asked

Bill's eyes lit up and he could feel a spark of magic flood through him

He wasn't really sure how he realized it but as if it were an instinct, he hopped onto the counter, grabbing a mixture of herbs and tossing them at the girls, snapping his fingers so that his tanuki magic would kick in

And sure enough, within no more than a second, the girls were outside somewhere and the house was safe

Admittedly, it felt sort of good being able to defend the house, and figuring out the right herbal mixture to make the spell work had been... well... fun

A few days later the original tanuki- Hiro- came back intending to turn Bill back into a human, having only wished for him to get a taste of the wild side that came with being a trickster spirit

But much to both of their surprises, Bill didn't WANT to become human again, he was having too much fun as a tanuki to give it up

And so Hiro allowed him to keep his powers, and the human living in the small cottage on the hill became known as the tanuki living in the small cottage of the hill

(Bill did request that Hiro transform him back into his human form before allowing him to leave though, he could in no way reach the top of his bookshelves like this)

The Werelion Who Wanted A Child

Once upon a time

In a land most hot and desert-like

There lived a were-lion named Azizi

Azizi was a very average were-lion and he was very content with being average

He wasn't interested in being especially powerful nor did he want anything to do with being different

As long as he could one day grow to have a pride of his own and protect them, he really didn't care for anything else

That is, until one day when his older sister Elewa had a child

Elewa was twice Azizi's age and had long since moved on to have her own pride, marrying a very powerful and noble were-lion who was already rumored to have the biggest pride in the territory before long

Azizi never cared that much for Elewa's husband, but she loved him and he figured that he should stay out of her business

He never cared much about children either actually, he had seen them around of course but they never were anything he gave any real interest to

Until his niece was born

When Elewa first announced she was pregnant Azizi was happy for her- well, he was happy that she was happy, he was indifferent that he would be gaining a new family member

His was the last litter born in their family and he had two sisters who had been born alongside him, making him a triplet

He had never been very impressed with his sisters- except for Elewa, as his only older sister he held a very great deal of respect for her- the other two however had ascended from the underworld and he was pretty sure of this

Constantly stirring up trouble, playing pranks, creating mischief, it was as if they lived to torment him

Perhaps, he reasoned, that was why the idea of having children never made him very happy, because he remembered what his triplet sisters had been like when they were children and he had remembered how dark the bags under his mother's eyes had gotten and he really didn't want that to be him

But when he went to visit Elewa after her child was born, his entire world changed

Elewa's daughter- Hawa

Hawa was the most beautiful thing Azizi had ever laid eyes on

She was as dark as the night sky with a tuft of cloud-like fuzzy hair on her head and eyes so round and brown that it reminded Azizi of little pools of melted chocolate

And she was so incredibly tiny, an entire finger was barely as big as Azizi's fingernail

He wasn't quite sure what to make of this kind of fondness, he had never felt it before

But when Elewa prompted him to hold his niece, he realized that it was the kind of love that only parents spoke of

That moment of "I saw my child and fell in love and knew right then and there that my entire world would always revolve around this precious little thing"

Azizi had never understood it and had never cared to, children just weren't important to him

Not until Hawa was born anyway

But Azizi found himself completely and utterly enthralled by her

Just holding her and watching her breathe in his arms was so amazing that it felt like he was watching magic in motion

And Azizi had seen magic in motion- he knew witches, it was no new experience- so he could say this with certainty

The fact that Hawa existed was far better than any magic in any plane of existence

His sister had given a gentle laugh when he started crying, saying that happy tears must be contagious

But she didn't understand

Azizi didn't even think HE fully understood

Because before he entered that room he could have been perfectly content to never see a child again

But as soon as he entered that room, he came to the realization that he wanted a child- he NEEDED a child

The thought of having a little life as precious and purely beautiful as Hawa of his own was like having the secrets of the universe held in front of him but remaining just out of reach

And he truly believed that children WERE the holders of those secrets

Anything you wanted to know could be answered by a child, he felt certain

It may not be the logical answer or the probable answer or the "Right" answer- if such a thing existed- but rest assured, you ask any child how the world was created, they'll give you an answer as special and unique as Hawa was

And for a reason that Azizi never did understand, he wanted that

So one day, a few days later, he told Elewa this

And Elewa laughed for a long moment as she fed Hawa before making a face at him and saying "Oh, you're serious"

It had made Azizi upset that there had been some doubt, his other sisters were the tricksters of the family, not him

"Yes, I'm serious," he reiterated

"I want a child! I want many children! I want to be blessed like you are Sister,"

Elewa gave him a gentle look before laughing quietly again and shaking her head

"I knew that one of these days your oddity would come to the surface Little Brother,"

Azizi's face pinched and he hurried to sit beside Elewa in the hopes for an explanation

"What do you mean by that?" he asked

"Well, no offense, but you're a male, male were-lions aren't supposed to want children, wives yes, sons to take over when they age, but you speak about having children like it's the 8th wonder of the world-"

"Because it IS Elewa!"

"You hear yourself don't you? Sweetie, I have never heard a male were-lion speak so .... worshiping of having children, not even my own husband,"

Azizi very much wanted to tell her how he doubted her husband spoke worshipingly of much besides the couch and dinner but he refrained, his mother had taught him better than that

"So? Elewa, you have a child now, you must understand,"

"OF COURSE I understand, I don't know a woman who DOESN'T understand, but that's just it Azizi, wanting children is a woman's

instinct- especially for were-lions- your instincts should be focused on building your pride and finding a suitable mate, on having a son to take over when you age, but I've seen you with Hawa the last few days, you don't want to put her down, you sing to her, you stare at her as if she hung the moon, and that isn't how male were-lions should act, they're the disciplinarians, they teach their sons and daughters to fight and fend for themselves, we lionesses nurture them, teach them to hunt, care for them, the lions should not get blurred,"

"Who cares if I want to nurture my children? It should be something to be celebrated, not frowned upon!"

"How will you lead your pride if you spend all of your time enamored with your cubs though?" Elewa pointed out

"I will find time, make time, I'll let my wife lead the pride if she wishes, I do not care, I simply want what you have,"

"You want to raise the children and let your wife lead the pride?" Elewa asked skeptically

And Azizi had never really thought about it like that but...

"Well... yes,"

Elewa chuckled, shaking her head and propping Hawa over her shoulder as she stood up

"Good luck finding a woman to go for that Little Brother, let me know if you find out how crop circles are made while you're at it."

Azizi had never felt so crushed in his life

He thought for sure that if anyone would understand, it would be Elewa

And for the first time, he felt truly uncomfortable in his masculinity

Azizi suckled for many days and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't go back to the same indifference he had before about children

Every single time he laid eyes on one his heart absolutely ached and he remembered the pure wonder and amazement of holding Hawa for the first time and the thought that wanting such a thing could be WRONG made him feel .... disturbed

He was no fool, he knew that lions were infamous for the way their children were raised- all by the mother, while the father defended the pride and did. ... little else

He knew that had been how it was in his own family and in every family he had met thus far but he didn't think that was some sort of hard and fast RULE that had been carved into stone before lions were created

He found himself frustrated, so frustrated in fact that he went away, traveling for many, many days until he found himself stopping at one of the biggest watering holes in the area for a drink

Which was where he met a very unexpected guest

"One water please," Azizi ordered with a sigh as he climbed upon the barstool, the bartender in front of him gave a nod and took off towards the glasses

"Just water? You look awfully down friend, I've got a good ear if you'd like to chew it off," came a deep chuckle from beside him

Turning on his barstool, Azizi met eyes with a man around his own age, with long hair as black as his own tied into a ponytail, skin a few shades lighter but still baked brown as if he had been in the sun for days, and eyes the same smooth brown- holding the same gentleness about them- as Hawa's

Azizi leaned a bit closer and sniffed, eyebrows raising as he leaned back again

"You're a wolf," he observed

"And you're a lion," the man chuckled

"What is a wolf doing around here? Don't you live much farther north?"

"I was visiting a friend for his wedding, I'm Wayra, and what's your name my friend?" he asked with a gentle smile

"Azizi," the were-lion answered

"It's a pleasure to meet you Azizi, may I ask what's troubling you?"

Azizi took a deep breath glancing at the glass of water on the counter before looking back at Wayra and fidgeting

"I want a child," he said softly

Wayra stared at him for a moment before his lips quirked up into a smile

"And getting one of those is an awful chore I hear," he replied jovially

"No no you don't understand, I'm a lion, male lions aren't supposed to.... care about children like this, want them like this, they should want heirs and that's all, just heirs,"

"Ahhh and you want not an heir, but a beloved part of your soul, is that it?"

"Yes... yes you get it,"

"My friend, I'm the same way, I very eagerly await my chance to start a family, not because I'm looking for someone to take over my pack when I retire, but because there's nothing in the world quite like raising a child. it's the most amazing experience anyone could ever have,"

"Yes... but you're a werewolf, all werewolves think that way," he sighed

He should have known, wolves have essentially three modes: Territory, mate, breed, there really wasn't much else to them than that

"You're being awfully judgey for the odd man out," Wayra commented

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be, it's just..."

"Just that all male wolves want to have six hundred children the way all male lions want their children as heirs and nothing more?"

Azizi cringed at his own hypocrisy and hung his head

"I'm sorry,"

"It's alright, I don't blame you, I blame society, I know plenty of werewolves- male AND female- who don't want children at all, just so you know,"

"I wish I could say something so diverse about us but I've never met another one like me," Azizi sighed

"There's a match for everyone who wants one dear, you'll find yours, and if it's the other lions you're upset with then let them drown in the river for all you should care, people's breeding habits are no one's business but their own and their partner's, if you even want a partner, there's nothing stopping you from adopting a child all on your own,"

Azizi thought about that for a moment, nodding slowly in understanding

Wayra had a good point...

"I don't understand why it has to be like this though," Azizi sighed

"Because everyone wants everyone to be the same, why do lions get the short end of the breeding stick? Haven't the foggiest, but when a wolf doesn't want pups? Yeesh, it's an uproar! We all have our problems to weed through, societal collars around our necks, the question is, do you want to wear that collar or ditch it somewhere and live the way YOU want to?"

"You're very wise," Azizi commented

"I'm not as young as I look, I want children yes, but it's taken me a very long time to find a mate, I still haven't found one, I don't fall in love easily,"

"There's nothing wrong with that,"

"Oh, I know that, but you'd be hard pressed to find too many other people who know that as well,"

"I suppose you have a point," he mumbled, taking a drink of his water and smiling as Wayra clapped a hand over his shoulder

"Cheer up dear, things will go the way they're meant to, have a little faith," Azizi smiled and thanked Wayra for his advice before paying for the water and jumping down from the stool

And just as he did, he found himself bumping into one of the waitresses

"Oh I'm so sorry! That was all my fault!" Azizi said worriedly

"Please, please don't worry about it," she laughed as he helped her to stand on her feet again

"I'm Azizi, please let me make it up to you,"

"Kibibi, and really, it's fine,"

That night, Azizi and Kibibi ended up going on a date

And three years later, Azizi found himself holding his first child

Not with Kibibi though

Nor with Jiona or any of the other seven girls he had dated that year

No, it wasn't until he went to Wayra's wedding far, far away that he met a beautiful woman named Zyanya there at the reception

And Zyanya wanted EXACTLY what Azizi wanted

Two years later they welcomed their first child, Kamara, and as a surprise to absolutely no one, Azizi cried for hours after she was born

Everyone who Saw Kamara was overcome with so much joy that they couldn't help cut cry

After all, as they say, happy tears are contagious

The Werewolf Who Couldn't Stop Shaving

Once upon a time

In a time much like our own

There lived a werewolf

A very anxious werewolf at that

For this werewolf, Chester, was always worried about people liking him

It's what he wanted more than anything in the entire world- to be liked

He was constantly concerned with it, always worried that he was coming off all wrong, and always hating his appearance

Chester thought he was unattractive on good days, flat out ugly on bad, and it wasn't out of vanity that he was so concerned with his appearance, it was out of anxiety

Because he was afraid- once again- that people wouldn't like him

It didn't matter that Chester was beautiful or that he was a gentle, sweet soul, he still feared that people wouldn't like him

And this all came to a head, one day, when he was running very, very late for a very important date-

Well...

Not a date-date, a date with the book club

But to him, that was even more important than a date-date

He was running so late that he ran into the bathroom without even checking to see if it was being used

"In the future, you should knock first Little Brother," his sister pointed out

"Sorry Charlotte, sorry, just running late, can I use your comb?" he asked quickly

"Ugh, you don't have lice or fleas do you?"

"No,"

"Fine." Charlotte agreed with a roll of her eyes, flipping her long black hair over her shoulder and continuing to rub lotion over her legs

"What are you doing?" Chester asked a moment later as he dragged the comb through his hair

"Moisturizing my legs,"

"Why?"

"Because I just shaved?" she answered, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world

"Shaved?" Chester echoed

"Yeah, you should consider it sometime Ches, or at least think about trimming that forest growing on your face," she teased

Subconsciously, Chester reached up and scrubbed his hand over his face, frowning at the scruff he felt there

"You really think I should...?"

"Sure I do, I haven't seen my brother's full face in over a year, I bet you're pretty handsome underneath that bird's nest,"

And Chester, because he was a very literal person, took her quite seriously

He went to the book club meeting and the entire time felt odd and uncomfortable in his own skin- well, more so than usual

He kept thinking about it, wondering if he would REALLY look better clean-shaven, and looking around at the other men in the group

There were several that weren't sporting facial hair, including one young man who had what many would call a "baby face", the smoothest, softest skin Chester had ever seen

Of course, after sniffing around, Chester realized he was a selkie, and seal-folk were rather notorious for being hairless, it made it easier on them to get in and out of their skins

And he seemed to be getting most of the attention this time around...

Of course that was likely due to the fact that he was the newest member of the book club, but Chester's anxiety insisted otherwise

So when he got home that night he called his sister away from her reading to help him

Being without his scruff was strange, it felt like he was missing something, and he didn't quite like it

The extra hair on his face always reminded him of being a wolf, it was comforting and secure, but Charlotte seemed to like him better without it, spending five minutes telling him how impressed she was and how much better he looked without it

He found similar reactions the next day when he went out, many people complimenting him or saying that they didn't recognize him

"I wouldn't have believed it was you if it hadn't been for your sweater vest!" Jeanine, the baker, had told him

It made sense, after all he WAS known for having some rather spiffy sweater vests

But despite how much he missed his beard, he liked the attention he was getting

The next day however, was another story, and his sister did NOT appreciate being woken up to Chester's screaming

"The hair came back! The hair came back!" he shouted

"Yes well, hair has a tendency to do that, what rock did you just crawl out from beneath?" Charlotte sighed

"I thought it would be gone for at least a week," he frowned

Charlotte laughed, shaking her head

"If you keep it gone for two days you're lucky, but it's just stubble little brother, nothing to worry about,"

Chester frowned, running his hand over his face and cringing at the sharp prickles of his stubble

He disagreed with Charlotte- this was definitely something to worry about...

Unfortunately things kept up like that for several weeks

Every morning it felt like Chester woke up to his hair having grown faster and thicker than before and no matter what he did he couldn't seem to control it

Charlotte insisted that there was nothing wrong and no one could even see it at this point

But Chester could see it, he could FEEL it, he knew it was there

Stubble was itchy and scratchy and just felt icky and he wanted it gone

But the more he shaved it away, the more it seemed to grow back

He found himself on the night of the full moon staying in his wolf form longer than anyone else, having missed the warm comfort of his fur that his beard usually reminded him of

He didn't want to shift back, back to too much skin and not enough fur and the razor burn and the nose-tingling smell of the shaving cream

He didn't understand why he was perfectly free to be fluffy in this form, but needed to be stripped hairless as a human, but he didn't think it was very fair

Over the course of weeks he became resigned to his fate and slowly began shaving more and more until he was at the point that he was shaving twice a day

Charlotte said it was excessive but Chester couldn't be bothered to listen, he was too concerned with how bad he felt all the time, always feeling the urge to peel away every last hair

He knew for a fact that human hair didn't grow this much and he found himself resenting the fact that he was a werewolf, even though he had always felt that that was the best part of himself

Things changed again, however, one night when he went walking into the bathroom he shared with his sister

"One of these days, little brother, you're going to learn to knock," Charlotte huffed in frustration

"Sorry, I have to shave," he mumbled with a resigned sigh, stopping short when he took in the sight before him

A girl perched on a chair while his sister rubbed some horrible smelling sudsy stuff in her short, pixie-cut hair

"What are you doing?" he asked in confusion

"Dying Emiline's hair white," Charlotte replied

"Why?"

"Because I like it and can't do it myself," Emiline answered

"But why white? Isn't white hair associated with age?"

"So? Why should I care what other people think? I like having my hair white, I think it's pretty," she shrugged back

"But..."

"Is this about your obsessive shaving thing Chester? Because if it is.... you know, when I said you should consider it, I meant once in a while

to see if you liked the way it looked, not to turn yourself into a Sphynx cat every few hours," Charlotte clarified

"So you like me better with the beard?" Chester asked in confusion

Charlotte groaned, tossing his head back and rolling her eyes

"It doesn't MATTER what I like, it doesn't matter what Emiline likes, it doesn't matter what Paul The Copy place Guy likes-"

"But I like Paul..."

"Chester, what matters is what YOU like, I don't shave my legs because someone else wants me to- no matter how much society likes to push that button- but because I WANT to, and there are days when I don't want to and I DON'T, now do you like being one razor burn away from making yourself into reptilian?"

"No," he confessed quietly

"I didn't think so, now put down the razor, step away from the sink, and let your beard grow- if you want it to, maybe just let the stubble turn into a five o'clock shadow, or maybe just take a break, do whatever makes YOU comfortable,"

Chester listened to her words, trying to listen and do as she asked

What made him comfortable?

Doing exactly what he had done before

A week went by and when it was time for the next book club meeting Chester found himself sporting the same full facial fluff that he had when this entire thing started

He was nervous at first, going back, but to his surprise he got just as many compliments as he had before- even more so!

People said he looked like himself again and his anxiety lowered- even just slightly- to the point of feeling comfortable in his skin once more, well... as comfortable as he could be anyway

He still had a lot to work on before he was OK with himself, he knew that, and he knew that it was OK, but realizing that looking how he wanted was more important than looking how he thought other people wanted him to was already helping things by miles

Especially due to what happened after the book club's meeting had ended...

"Um, hi,"

Chester looked up, blinking and staring at the selkie from a few weeks ago

"I'm Teddy, I um... started a few weeks ago,"

The selkie- Teddy- seemed just as nervous as Chester felt, if the constant fidgeting and rabbit-pace of his heart beat said anything about it

He pulled slightly on his leather jacket, ran his fingers through his thick copper hair, and gave Chester a lop-sided smile

"I just wanted to say... it's nice seeing you with the scruff back, I can't grow facial hair- you know, *seals*- but I've always thought it looked good... and it does look good, especially on you, so ... thumbs up," he smiled shyly

Chester beamed, standing and biting his lip

"You think so? Because I... I like your face, I mean... I like it how it is,"

"Really? Thanks, your sweater vest is really cute by the way, do you knit them...?"

Chester gave a quick nod, his face already starting to turn red

"That's so cool, I bet my brother would love one for Christmas... do you take commissions...?"

"I don't... but I could make one as a gift?"

"Well we hardly no each other, I couldn't accept a gift, maybe... a trade? Maybe I could buy you dinner or ... something,"

Chester felt his heart flutter and he smiled, clutching his book to his chest

"That sounds fantastic, tomorrow? Seven?"

"Yeah absolutely! I'll give you my number,"

And for the first- but not the last- time, Chester felt extremely happy that he kept his looks the way he wanted them

The Werewolf's Collection

Once upon a time

In a land many miles from here

There lived a werewolf named Gregory

He was a very gentle wolf who lived upon a great hill, and every morning, he walked down the hill and for miles and miles around the bend until he reached a very special destination

Specifically, the location of a comic book dealer

The dealer was a Tanuki by the name of Tatsuya, and Gregory was by far his best and most loyal customer

For although there were plenty of other comic book dealers much closer to Gregory's hill, he always preferred to walk the extra mile to get to Tatsuya's Tanuki den, for Tatsuya always had the best comic books in the best condition

(You don't get a first edition copy of Elder Wolf Vol. 1 all the way from the 1980s just anywhere you know)

And there was another benefit, over time Gregory came to greatly enjoy the walk from his den to Tatsuya's

It was long, sure, but it was a half hour well spent and he always kept himself entertained humming tunes on the way there, and sneaking glimpses at his prized comics on the way back

For many years, it was the most ideal set up anyone could dream of

...

And then Tatsuya got married and it all went... well... downhill from there

Gregory knew well Tatsuya's wife Ayame, why, she was the Alpha of a pack not far east from his own

It was a little surprising that they found each other interesting, Tatsuya dabbled in magic and lore and spent his days beneath the ground with his hoard of literature and collectibles and Ayame had time only for training and guiding her pack, her life was full of structure and the early mornings and running along the beach

Well, Gregory figured, he supposed the saying was right that opposites do attract

But there was a problem ahead, not long after the union, a very big problem

Ayame's pack was East of there after all, not too far east, not impossible to get to

But far enough that it was highly impractical for her to live in the Tanuki den with Tatsuya

Given that Tatsuya's employment was considerably mobile in comparison to Ayame's, it was only logical that they move closer to her home- closer to her pack

Tatsuya had no real objection to this, Tanukis may be homemakers at heart but they were no strangers to traveling, they had gotten used to it over the many generations of being chased about by hunters, angry merchants, and more-than-mildly-irritated Kitsune alike

(So Tanuki weren't the BEST at making outer-species friendships, many folk weren't! Why just look at humans! Their biggest achievement in relationships outside of their own species is domesticating grand and wild beasts into palm-sized fuzzballs in tutus- oh for SHAME human species... it almost made the countless- and usually harmless!- practical jokes Tanukis played on anything that breathed look mild)

But as the story goes, all was well for Tatsuya and Ayame

...

All was NOT well for Gregory

He tried going to other dealers in Tatsuya's absence but it wouldn't work, nothing was quite the same

"I've tried every other comic book dealer in the area and none of them can even hold a candle to Tatsuya," he complained one day

"I'd like to hold a candle to Tatsuya after that rat put a levitating spell on my favorite teapot and poured tea all over me last month... in front of my mother-in-law..." grumbled the woman listening to him

"Rosa please, I'm trying to complain about an actual problem here, the stain washed right out," Gregory sighed- to be fair, this regretful memory DID manage to make its way into their conversation every single week so it wasn't like he hadn't heard it before

"Out of the dress maybe but not out of my mother-in-law's memory, but yes, let's continue about your problems,"

Really, the tone was better suited elsewhere

"I should've talked to Jean," he sighed

"Yes, well Jean is in a pickle with a kitten so I'm afraid you're stuck with me for now,"

"All I'm saying is that I just can't switch comic book stores, I can't, I won't, none are comparable,"

"Well why don't you try being modern and using a computer? I get that you like the old-fashioned way but you said it yourself, something has to give," Rosa suggested, leaning back on the couch to file her nails

"I can't order comic books on line, are you crazy? There's no way of telling if they're in good condition or not! Besides there's no browsing quality, there's nothing like going to a shelf of new releases and just... skimming everything until you find the one shining piece of the collection, it's just not the same doing it on line,"

Rosa popped her gum, giving him a flat look

"My sister says the SAME thing about her doll collecting you know? Crazy chick flies all over the countryside checking stores when there's a perfectly good Internet connection right in her living room, 'it isn't the same' she says, 'what about eye-wonk?' she says, I've got news for her if anyone is really going to hold a magnifying glass to a vinyl doll head to look for a slight paint imperfection there are bigger problems at hand,"

"Rosa you must collect SOMETHING, surely you'd understand,"

"I collect shot glasses and trust me there's none of this finer inspection you two have going on in going to a souvenir place and picking up a glass with some paint on it- by the way, you two should host like, a book club or something, it'd do you both well,"

He rolled his eyes, sighing with seemingly his entire body

"I don't have time for a bo- .. wait... did you say your sister FLIES across the countryside?"

"Yeaaahh she's a familiar, takes the form of a raven, she's adopted," she shrugged back

Gregory beamed, leaping to his feet despite the frustrated look his pack mate gave when he jostled the couch

"Flying! That's it!"

"Oh.... Goddess... please don't tell me you're off on some horrendous quest to craft yourself a flying machine or worse find a witch wicked enough to give you a flying potion..." she cringed

"Nothing of the sort, but I realized, if your sister is using her natural gifts to FLY... why don't I use my natural gifts to RUN?"

"You mean instead of walk?"

"Something like that, I have to go test this out, thanks Rosa!" he shouted excitedly, rushing out of her house like a bullet

Rosa, in the meantime, just shook her head and went back to her nails

One of these days she was going to have to force Jean to take care of her own friendships instead of fooling around, getting a kitten out of a tree...

But Gregory was elated, he finally had figured this out!

He got roughly half-way back to the hill at his house, a relatively short journey all in all, and rushed inside to grab a spare change of clothes, folding them into a nap sack and tying it around his neck as he shifted into his wolf form, ignoring the clutter of clothes it left behind and racing towards Tatsuya's newest location

Why hadn't he seen it before?

Sure, he was too slow to make the journey before, but with his enhanced speed in his wolf form he was able to make it just fine

Of course it was still a little exhausting, and he was easily doubling his average walk time, but it was well worth it to arrive at the familiar scent of the comic book store, ducking behind some trees to shift back and toss on his clothes before sprinting into the shop and heading straight for the new release shelf

"If you walked all the way here Greg you sure are more determined than I thought," Tatsuya commented as he adjusted a display of action figures

"I didn't walk," Gregory shrugged, picking up the newest edition of Elder Wolf: The Return #95 Platinum Age

"I ran,"

The Witch Who Created A Werewolf

Once upon a time

In a land full of creepy, spooky things

There lived a witch

She was a bit of a koo-koo witch with crazy red hair and long painted nails and jewelry and charms stacked all over her body like 3D tattoos of metal

But despite looking a little bit like something that fell out of the sky, she was a generally nice witch who loved one thing more than anything else:

Halloween

Halloween was and always will be the best day of the year and she loved nothing more than to celebrate it as extravagantly as possible

The entire town gathered at the bottom of the hill each year to see what the witch would do for Halloween night, as her creepy old house was always decorated more than anyone else's in the neighborhood

(Despite the government's opinion)

This year was an especially special year, as the witch had a friend visiting and wanted to impress her

No one in town was a stranger to the lengths she would go to for a perfect house, including the town Hoard Master Larry

(Yes, he was aware that the name needed some improvement, but just as a group of wolves was called a pack and a group of lions was called a pride, a group of zombies was called a hoard and so far the powers that be weren't too keen on changing it just for a better job description)

Larry had a very important job as he was the only one in town who wrestled the difficult task of wrangling the zombies

After all, no one wanted those things getting loose but it would be too much of a pain to just hunt them down all over the place- that's how the town accountant George bit the dust, he got in over his head and went out hunting zombies and well...

The zombies actually WEREN'T responsible for his demise

That would be George's own fault for being too big for his pants and shooting at a zombie only to miss and shoot off a tree limb which lead to a chain reaction that ultimately left George in a river six miles away

But that's another story for another day, the point was, the town no longer allowed zombie hunting- do you have any idea how hard it is to find a good accountant?

Now Larry was the one who went out and wrangled the zombies and brought them back to the zombie farm on the town border because he was the only one in possession of the newly patented Zombie Repellent Suit

A suit of chain mail that was specifically designed to prevent zombie bites

It was very high-end, very expensive, which was why Larry was the only one in the town who currently had one

Larry did various things with the zombies, he loaned out and sold a lot of them out as security measures and some to various educational programs like the police academy and medical colleges, but every now and then he got a very odd duck that didn't fit in with the average skin-crawling, brain-eating living dead

(And no, he isn't referring to the lawn ducks but still)

Every now and then he got parts from some of the scientists and alchemists in the area to be sewn together and sold off to necromancers

It was by far his least favorite part of the job but someone had to do it- (actually, no one had to do it, it wasn't like it was a necessary job)- and Larry stepped up to the plate

But there were those few cases...

Those few, once-in-a-blue-moon oddities, that he just couldn't find a use for

This happened to be one of those cases

One of the vampire clans had delivered a body to him earlier that day after the clan leader's daughter had gone a little over-zealous with her feeding earlier and Larry expected this one to be just like the others he got this way: off to the alchemists he'd go

After all he didn't need another zombie- NO ONE needed another zombie, ever, as a rule- and the alchemists didn't seem to be giving up any time soon in this race they had with the medical scientists on who could be the first ones to bring the dead back to life without magic, and vampire victims seemed to do slightly better with the alchemists

...

Well

They didn't rot as quickly at least....

Regardless that was what he had been planning, he had even started getting the box together and everything when all of a sudden he saw the teeniest, tiniest twitch of motion

This one was still kicking

A feat twice as remarkable since apparently he had managed to fool the vampires into believing he was dead

Upon realizing this he came to the conclusion that there was really only one person he could call to take the- decidedly not dead- body off of his hands

Which is why the witch with the crazy red hair was called into action

The witch was known for taking care of all sorts of things that were unusual and uncommon and Larry was hoping that she could take care of this one too

Of course she had been all for it and eagerly took Larry up on the offer to take care of his puzzling pile of bones (or not quite bones as it were)

He wasn't entirely sure what she was going to do with the spare, not-quite-dead-yet body, but he trusted her with this sort of thing and so he left it be

Luckily however, the witch knew exactly what she was going to do with the almost-dead body

As soon as she had the body hauled into her kitchen, she set to work, removing all sorts of things from her very expensive, very prominent potion table and starting to sprinkle this, dab that, and all around cover the body in what was needed, before opening up her spell book and thumbing through it until she found the right spell

Namely, the spell of werewolfism

Oh sure, werewolfism was a natural occurrence and it was usually better left that way

But like most supernatural creatures there was a way to create one out of an average human, and this happened to be just that spell

And thus a werewolf was born, and the witch named him Matthew

Why?

No one knew, actually

She just did

Matthew, being only recently back from the brink of death, was not quite yet accustomed to... well... much of anything to do with life yet...

Although this made his job fairly easy for now

All the witch needed him to do for the first two weeks of his inception was just stand in the yard and look scary

Oh there were plenty of problems with this supposedly simple plan of course

Like the fact that his first day on the job some kid came by and pulled his pants down and he didn't have the good sense to pull them back up

Or the fact that two days after his job began it started to rain and it took three hours before the witch realized that he had no intention of coming inside and she had to go out and fetch him

He nearly strangled himself when he decided to start messing around with the cobwebs on one of the trees and ended up with a bungee cord around his neck

To say nothing of the fleas in his chest hair incident

Yes it was all well and good to keep him out until Halloween but the moment the witch's porch lights went out on Halloween night Matthew came inside

There were just too many risks at this point and she was worried that the next problem was going to involve a kidnapping

She wasn't sure WHY anyone would kidnap a six-foot-tall werewolf but stranger things have happened

And she DID have that friend in California who kept losing his own werewolf mate to kidnappers like every three months no matter how much security he had or how tough and aggressive his mate looked

Little known fact, werewolves actually aren't that intimidating

Sure they LOOK it but what do they REALLY do on Friday nights?

If her friend's constant voice mails were any indication they were mostly prone to curling up by a fire and reading while sipping on hot chocolate or sleeping in the middle of the nearest moonbeam like a cat

Her friend hadn't planned on having a cat when his boyfriend moved in but considering how many times he walked down the hall and accidentally got himself scratched on his sleeping werewolf's claws that had been what ended up happening

He had to buy three extra security systems AND up his own magic to keep the various thieves and kidnappers away since APPARENTLY werewolves really aren't much for fighting back, they just let themselves get dragged around like dogs on leashes or cats in sacks

No, that was wrong, the witch had a dog, they definitely put up more of a fight

And you'd be lucky to get away with both your eyes if you ever tried putting a cat in a bag

Yes she really wasn't sure what to make of this occurrence but Matthew was pretty useless in the protection front, he mostly was either a lawn ornament or a very quiet pet

Regardless, she realized this was no time to start delving into werewolf psychology, she'd start that in the spring, right now her bigger concern was just getting him inside and keeping him inside before someone else came along to drag him off

As soon as she had the garage door shut she went about the routine of turning out the outdoor lights and expected any moment to be approached by Matthew...

But that never happened

Finally a half hour later she walked back out to the garage and gave Matthew a frustrated look

"Can I come inside? Or do I have to live out here?" he finally asked, yawning and starting to kick at his ear with his foot

The witch took in a deep breath, both thankful and somehow a little disappointed that werewolf pounds didn't exist in this state, and running a hand down her face

"Come in," she mumbled

She wasn't sure where he was going to sleep yet but that was another problem for another day

Maybe she'd call Larry in the morning and ask him how he controlled any slightly smarter than average zombies....

The Wolf Run

Once upon a time

A very long time ago

There was a girl named Darla

She was a beautiful girl with fine blond hair and startling blue-green eyes

A tiny thing with the sweetest smiles and the palest skin

She much resembled a porcelain doll to look at her

But if anyone could speak to her, they would find she was much, much more

There was one person in particular who had the privilege of learning this about her

His name was Ray

And he was a werewolf

The two of them met many centuries ago, in the middle of town like most other people did

Ray had hair blacker than night and eyes almost as dark

He smiled with all of his soul and as soon as he saw her, he took quite a liking to Miss Darla

"I believe you've dropped this," he said as he held a silver pocket watch out towards her

Darla stared down at the pocket watch in his hand and smiled sweetly as she accepted it

"Thank you, I have no idea how this escaped me ... what is your name?" she asked as she slipped the watch back into its proper place

"Ray, Ray McBride, and yours?"

"Darla O'Donovan," she smiled back

"Darla?" he asked with an amused smile

"Then may I just call you Darling?"

She let out a slight laugh and shook her head

"That's just an easy way to avoid remembering my name,"

"Not at all! It's a very lovely name, just as you have a very lovely watch," he insisted

"Oh? You know something about watches do you?"

"As a matter of fact I collect them," he said, pulling one from his pocket and showing it off to her

The watch was silver with a raven carved into the front and when it opened the face had some sort of gorgeous etching on the inside, like ethereal, script-work wings

"This is gorgeous," she breathed

"I can think of things that far outweigh the beauty of any watch," he shrugged back, taking her hand and depositing the watch in it

"I'll gladly give it to you if you're half as charmed by this watch as I am by you"

Darla's mouth dropped open and she began to return the watch but Ray stepped back before she could, shaking his head slowly

"I'll see you again soon perhaps, Miss Darla," he said as he vanished into the sea of people

Darla stared at the watch in her hand and felt her heart flutter, holding it to her chest and rushing home

That night, and for the next several days, all that she could think of was the mysterious man and his watch

She found herself growing more and more unable to stop thinking of him and it was frustrating, she didn't know why...

She had half-suspected he had charmed the watch somehow but her witch friend Lexi had confirmed that the watch hadn't been tampered with

It was rather frustrating to say the least

And then one day, just as suddenly as the first time, she met him again

This time in a market

"Ray!" she shouted into the crowd

The man looked up, smiling brightly at her as he waved her over

"Ray I ... I really didn't mean to take your watch," she began, starting to fish it out of her bodice

"No no, please keep it, it's just a gift, I'm sorry for earlier, I'm not usually such a flirt, I just... I am very drawn to you Miss Darla," he said with a soft smile

Darla stared at him for a moment, her blond curls brushing against her face as she shook her head

"You can call me Darling,"

It wasn't any sort of privilege that she granted anyone, not even her own family, but this man...

Something about him was just... a draw....

Like she had met him before and already fallen in love with him a dozen times over

"Do you feel it too then my darling? The draw?"

Darla gave a small nod, clutching the watch closer

"I don't understand why,"

Ray gave her a soft smile, slightly buried beneath the thick mustache he was sporting

"I don't think anyone ever truly does, but if you'd like, I can help you try,"

Being that she was somewhat desperate to find answers, Darla gave a nod of approval and Ray told her to meet him later that night in the woods

She wasn't sure why but she felt safe in following his instructions and without any further prompting, she indeed met him in the woods

"Ray?" she called out upon her arrival

"Right here Darling," he said as he appeared suddenly behind her

Darla turned on her heel, dress skirts swishing around her at the action

"Don't step out like that, you could have spooked me,"

"I'm very sorry," he said with an amused grin

"If that's what you call 'sorry' then I'd hate to see what not being sorry looks like," she frowned

Ray gave a sharp, joyful laugh as he walked closer

"You really are a treasure my darling," he said with a smile

"What is it you wanted to show me Ray? What is it that you think will help me understand this?"

"The moon," he replied, looking up

Darla copied him on instinct but looked back a moment later when she heard the rustling of clothes beside her

And when she looked down, she saw not a man, but a wolf

A brilliant black wolf with searing gold eyes standing in front of her

The wolf stepped forward and she stepped back, only then noticing the pile of clothes on the ground beneath the wolf's feet

"Ray?" she breathed

The wolf gave what appeared to be an approving nod before stepping forward again and nuzzling against her hand

With great caution, she reached out slowly and petted beneath the wolf's chin, smiling when he nuzzled back against her

This was the beginning of one of the greatest love stories of all time

This was the beginning of a true fairytale romance

This was the beginning of something entirely supernatural

And by the time a year had passed, Ray and Darla had developed quite a routine, especially for the full moons

"You're almost late you know," Darla mused as she walked out onto the pier

Ray gave her a soft smile and stepped closer as well, holding his hand out for her

"The shipment was almost late, but don't worry, it's here now,"

"You work far too hard," she said with a frown

"I swear it Ray, one of these days you're going to work until you just keel right over,"

Ray gave a small laugh and took her hand gently, stepping closer and placing his free hand on her waist

"I know this isn't what you want to hear my darling but something tells me that such a thing isn't going to change over night, nor will it be too different in future lifetimes," he chuckled

"That isn't a good thing," she frowned deeply

"Oh but it's part of us," he smiled teasingly, starting to sway against her

Darla faked a frown as she danced along with him back, no music needed, just the sound of the waves crashing against the pier

"If you don't watch out, I'm not going to give you the new pocket watch I found for you,"

"Oh! You have a new one?" he asked excitedly, a beat skipping before he laughed again

"Very clever Darling, I get it,"

"Ah- ... that was unintentional, and I'll give you the watch tonight after the run," she explained

"Unintentional or not it was still clever," he smiled as they danced across the pier, leaning in and giving her a chaste kiss

"Hm... so you can see the future now can you?" she asked, changing the subject

"Not at all, but I have it on good reconnaissance from someone who can, that this is the case,"

"Oh really? And tell me, were you this insufferable in our previous lives as well? I find it hard to believe I'd tolerate this much of a person more than once,"

"Well according to my sources it's safe to say a yes on both accounts Darling, perhaps you need to re-evaluate what you consider to be too much," he laughed

Darla clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes

"Pity, you'd think I'd learn my lesson the first time,"

"Not even the thirty-fourth," he hummed back

"Well if this has been happening for such an extreme amount of time, why bother stopping now?" she hummed, smiling and leaning down to give him a gentle kiss as well

"Not any reason at all," he said softly, nuzzling into the kiss

"Ray... the sun is setting, the moon will be full soon,"

"Another moment.."

"No no, if we go now we can still make it to the woods in time,"

Ray sighed listlessly, tangling his fingers in her curls and simply taking a moment to smile at her

To admire her face and be drawn in by her beauty

"As you wish my sweet," he said gently, taking her hand and leading her towards the carriage

It was a relatively short ride but in the autumn the sun had set much faster and Darla had been right, by the time they arrived at the woods, the moon was already up

"I see everyone else beat us here," Darla mused as she stared at the pack of wolves waiting patiently in front of the trees

"I suppose so," he smiled, starting to strip out of his clothes

"You know, one of these days I'm not going to be able to keep up with you wolves," Darla pointed out as she too stripped her shoes and jewelry away

"Then have you decided to take the bite yet?" Ray asked curiously, folding his clothes neatly

"I will one day I'm sure, but-"

"Not today, and that's alright," he said, turning and pulling her closer, kissing her again

"I will love you no matter what form you take, wolf, human, in between," he said softly

"Even a... Praying Mantis?" she asked as she stepped out of her dress, leaving herself in only a short white slip

"I would gladly be your dinner,"

"You're terrible," she said with a smirk as she tapped his nose

"You love me," he teased, looking like a child in a candy store as he said it

"I do," she smiled back, much more softly, and kissed his lips

"I believe though, that the wolves are getting impatient,"

"Let them," Ray groaned

"No no, we should go,"

Ray sighed, nodding and pecking her lips one last time before allowing the shift to take over and transforming into the same massive black wolf under the moon's light

He glanced back and Darla gave a nod before he sprinted into the forest, the rest of the wolves racing to catch up with him before Darla broke into a run, leaping over some rocks and dead trees and running along the clearing they had spaced out for her many moons ago so she could run smoothly without her delicate feet being damaged by any rocks or twigs

It was quite a sight

A beautiful girl with air-kissed blond curls running undressed alongside a pack of wolves

But it was ritualistic

It was sacred

It was theirs

And so it didn't much matter what anyone else thought about it

How strange it looked or how dangerous it sounded

It was theirs, and Darla and Ray had a very special penchant for not allowing anyone else to take what belongs to them

Some say, in fact, that this is why they're still together

Hundreds of years into the future, in new bodies with new names, but still together

Tonight, however, was not about that

Tonight was about the same thing every full moon is about

Freedom

Freedom and peace, and love, and joy

All of the gifts that the moon brings to us are to be celebrated

And what better way to do that than to run beneath her light?

And so started the monthly tradition for werewolves- all creatures had full moon rituals, or at least the more evolved of them did- for wolves to shift during the full moon and to run with their entire packs through the woods

And after-wards- though this, Darla discovered, seemed to be much more unique to Ray and his pack than to werewolves in general

As after the run

After running along with these beautiful creatures

Bare feet tapping on the ground and chest heaving as lungs contracted and tried to pull in more air

A river came into view up ahead and everyone began to howl and run towards it eagerly

A moment later multiple splashes were heard as wolf after wolf jumped into the river to play around and romp in the water

Darla took her time slipping out of her slip before dipping into the water, watching as Ray slipped in next to her and shape shifted into his human form

"You could have done that FIRST you know, now I'm certain there's dog hair in here," she pointed out

"And I did that all by myself?" he laughed

"Well you certainly didn't help matters," she huffed

Ray gave a small laugh, smiling and wrapping his arms around her, littering her face in kisses and making her laugh as she pulled him closer

"I want the bite," she said after a moment

Ray stared up at her, beaming happily and nodding, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze

"Yes... yes of course, but for now, let's just have tonight, hm?"

Darla smiled gently, pulling him in for a kiss as the pack splished and splashed around them

It didn't matter, they hardly noticed, as far as they were concerned they were completely alone

"Yes, let's just have tonight, let's just live in the moment."

The Yeti's Flower Crown

Once upon a time

In a land below the mountains

There lived a yeti named Theodore

Theodore was a very interesting yeti

Not because he could shape shift to blend in with the humans- all yetis could do that- but in fact because his shape shifting was... well... imperfect

He had a tendency to lose control of his shape shifting very easily

Unlike most yetis who could easily transition between their natural form and their human facade, Theodore had quite a bit of trouble keeping his human form for a long time, or under stress or pressure

All too many times he had lost control of his human image and fluffed out in front of people who he had been trying to stay human for

It was because of that, that Theodore was cursed to live in the mountains

For too many people were afraid of yetis, hated yetis, or just flat out didn't believe in yetis

And with someone as unpredictable as Theodore, it was all too possible that he would end up causing quite a stir in the human communities

It pained Theodore, being bound to the mountains to keep from anyone knowing he even existed, but it was necessary

He couldn't run a muck in-sighting fear and panic and hatred in the humans, it would damage not only him personally, but the entire yeti community

Humans were simple folk with small minds who could barely process the idea that they weren't the most advanced link at the top of the food chain

Anything that could so much breathe a threat to them was immediately met with hatred, fear, and cruelty, until they found a way to neutralize the threat

After all, how do you think so many animals have become extinct over time?

Just take the Thylacine for example- who posed no more a threat to humans than anything else with teeth

But because of humanity's fragile egos and quick-trigger panic button, they found it necessary to shoot down the Thylacine until it was no more

Only after it was too late did they begin to feel regret and remorse, realizing that their reasoning for taking these innocent lives was as flawed as the system that had openly allowed it

The Thylacine died an ugly, lonely death and became nothing more than a splotch in the history books and a picture on a flag because the humans couldn't control themselves and weren't satisfied with merely protecting themselves and their livestock

They weren't satisfied until they had turned the massacre of one of nature's most beautifully unique creations into a game and had ruthlessly picked each and every one of them off of the earth

Or so the humans had thought

Luckily, a few small colonies had managed to go into hiding and populate

Thylacine were still exceedingly rare but since their rediscovery a few years ago- around the time things like werewolves and faeries were also "discovered" (see: exposed themselves willingly) but at least they weren't completely out of the world yet

Theodore feared that if he in-sighted the rage of the humans, yetis would not be so lucky

And so he stayed obediently at the bottom of the mountains and woefully watched his siblings go into the human towns and forests to explore, all wearing their beautiful human guises

"Darling Yeti, what's wrong?" Theodore heard late one evening, looking up and seeing a beautiful elf in front of him

She sported long black hair, gorgeous tattoo-like markings across her body, and the signature elven pointed ears

She was breathtaking, from the tips of her ears down to the tips of her toes

And it only made Theodore feel worse

"I am hideous and stupid," he said quietly

The elf narrowed her eyes, crossing over to him easily and sitting on the rock in front of him

"Now you tell me exactly why you would say something so terrible," she demanded

"Because it's true!" he insisted

"I'm stupid, I can't keep up my human disguise like everyone else can, and I'm hideous because... well... just look at me!"

"Oh I see you," she said slowly, cupping his cheeks in her hands and forcing him to look up at her

"I see you dear, and you are beautiful- and I'm not just talking about that cliché 'it's on the inside what matters' sort of beautiful, I mean inside AND outside, just look at you! Such sleek fur! Such a smooth face! You are exceptionally beautiful for a yeti- and I do so adore yetis, but outward beauty is always a matter of personal opinion, I can't tell you how anyone else feels about you and you can't tell me how anyone else feels about me because it isn't OUR opinions, as for your intelligence

however... being able to control shape shifting has NOTHING to do with intelligence, it's about genes and maturity and-"

"But my siblings can do it!" he insisted

"My siblings can do it and they're younger than I am..."

"That doesn't matter, age and maturity are not the same thing," she said slowly

"AND even if this isn't a matter of growing into your own skin, even if you just can't shape shift the way most people do, that doesn't mean there's anything WRONG with you, and that STILL doesn't equate to your intelligence,"

Theodore gave a sigh, head hung sadly but nodding at her assessment anyway

"Look here my dear," she said softly, reaching out and tilting his chin up as she gave him her best smile

"I'd like to help you, if you're this upset with how things are, perhaps elf magic can assist,"

"You... you would really do that? For me?" he asked quietly

She gave a small nod and he smiled back at her

"May I hug you Miss Elf?"

"Why certainly, and please, call me Nicolette,"

Theodore smiled brightly, introducing himself as well before leaning down and giving Nicolette a yeti-sized hug

From there on Theodore and Nicolette became nearly inseparable

He followed her constantly and she stayed nearer the base of the mountains so he was more comfortable

Over the next few weeks they tried out many things with elf magic that they hoped would help Theodore with his problem, but to no avail

Until one day, that is, when it seemed something finally seemed to take effect

It was a newly refined type of Pixie Dust mixed with the earthy magic that elves used- in this case a special herbal mixture

It was a paste at first, experimental, and when Nicolette spread it onto a rock and gave it to Theodore to hold (it would be greatly inconvenient to paint anything on him after all, considering the sheer amount of fur) they were shocked and delighted to find that it seemed to be working

They tried everything they could to trigger Theodore's strange condition and to force him to shift before he was ready but nothing worked

It seemed for the time that Theodore was finally cured

"What sort of token would you like to have Theodore? It can be anything that you can wear or carry with you easily," Nicolette offered

Theodore stared at her for a moment, focusing on the half-crown of leaves she was currently sporting in her hair

"I... would like one of those, but with flowers, actually, if you don't mind," he said anxiously

Nicolette stared at him for a moment, beaming brighter

"You want a flower crown?"

"Um... yes... if that's what they're calling it these days,"

Nicolette nodded and smiled happily

"Absolutely, just hold on one second," she replied, quickly gathering some flowers into her hold and starting to weave them together quite effortlessly

Theodore watched, mesmerized with her movements as she wove each flower into the next and then- once it was in a perfect circle- painted the magic concoction onto the stems and placed it firmly on his head

Stepping back, she smiled in delight when a moment later he shifted into his human form

"It works! This is excellent! Oh you simply MUST come with me to the human towns!" she insisted with a bright smile

"R-Really?" he asked quietly

She gave a broad smile and a nod to that, taking his hand and pulling him away

"Really, come along, we'll get you put into some clothes first," she insisted

All he could do was just nod in response, not really sure how else to handle the situation

Nicolette made good on her promise too- dressing Theodore in what was modern, jeans and a t-shirt and sunglasses, before outfitting herself in similar sunglasses, jean shorts, and a tank top

"Come on then! Into the town!" she laughed, pulling him along once more

Theodore felt utterly conflicted as he followed her

On the one hand he was joyous

More so than he had been in an extremely long time, for he finally felt free, he was finally able to see the human world

On the other hand though he felt nervous, everyone was looking at them and within an hour he even ended up almost getting someone's "phone number"-whatever that was

But Nicolette had politely shoo'd her away

"Let's try this shop here!" she said excitedly, removing the lollipop- a candy they had purchased several minutes ago at a candy store- from her mouth and looping her arm through Theodore's as they walked

And as they came to the store window, Theodore, for the first time, saw what his human face looked like

He was beautiful, by everyone's standard

With eyes a crisp hazel and gold, olive colored skin and hair as black as Nicolette's, even some stray stubble hanging on his face

He was tall and lean but still generously muscular and more than anything he looked... normal, like he blended in, like he belonged

It was the most strange sensation he had ever felt

Such a gob-smacking confusion of emotions that he felt almost like the air was being punched out of him

And as his eyes wandered, they caught sight of the flower crown upon his head and felt an immense burst of happiness and pride in his chest

That flower crown was a symbol

A symbol of his humanity- his beauty- and of Nicolette's care for him

But the moment of joy didn't last long

For the powerful thrust of so many different emotions crashing into him all at once had been too strong and overpowered the magic of the flower crown and within moments the human facade was lost and in its place stood the reflection of a yeti, white shaggy fur, at least twice the size of his compact human form, and sporting sharp, over-sized teeth and claws

He was so upset by the transformation that Theodore felt tears prickling at his eyes

Gone was the beauty he held moments ago

Gone was the chance to be normal and blend in

Gone was his happiness and his life away from the mountains

He was doomed to a life of isolation and the thought hit him harder than ever as tears started to stream down his cheeks and soak his fur

"Theodore! Theodore!" Nicolette shouted as she rushed towards him

"Theodore what happened?"

The yeti sniffled, shaking his head and wiping at his eyes quite furiously

"I don't know... I don't know but I need to go home, people are already staring, they're already..." he choked on a sob, curling in on himself defensively and cringing at the eyes that he knew were on them

But no longer were they watching for his beauty, they were now watching for his hideousness

"Theodore... it's OK, really, I'll fight anyone who says anything, let's just go in the store and enjoy ourselves, you're beautiful remember? You ca-"

"You can't say that Nicolette!" he insisted as he slumped down onto the ground

"You can't say those things to me so easily, of course you can think of them, of course you can believe them, you're an elf! No one is afraid of you, no one hates you! You look just like they do, just your ears... and most people find them so beautiful, like I do, you are in no danger by staying here and letting people see your true self, but I am."

Nicolette felt a pain her chest at her careless words and nodded slowly, turning briskly on her heel

"This is no excuse for us to go home Theodore, you aren't the one with the problem so you shouldn't be the one to run away, if someone has a problem with you my darling, then they have a problem with me as well," she paused, raising her hands as the sky began to darken, clouds coming over the sun and thunder clapping in the distance as her coffee brown eyes turned to a dark, deadly black and wind began to swirl around her

Magic lit like electricity at her fingertips and she held herself with a stance of pure superiority and power

"Does anyone have a problem with me?" she asked slowly

At that, nearly all of the crowd dispersed, save for a small group of teenagers huddled together, one holding a phone up recording the encounter

Nicolette turned to them and snapped her fingers as the phone crumbled to dust before them, effectively frightening the boys away

Without an ounce of effort everything returned to normal, the clouds parted and Nicolette's eyes cleared and she stepped closer, taking Theodore's hands oh so carefully in her tiny grasp and smiling gently at him

"You're right, and I'm sorry, but I won't allow you to be sentenced to a life of misery in the mountains, you deserve this Theodore, you deserve the freedom of coming and going as you please, and I will WRECK anyone who has a problem with that," she promised, giving him a gentle kiss and stroking away his tears with her thumbs

"You can't accompany me everywhere Nicolette, and you can't tell me that using fear as a weapon is a good way to handle this,"

"I can't, and it isn't, but it's better than the alternative, we'll figure things out in time Theodore, we'll find a better way to handle this and we have an infinite amount of time to do so, but for now, allow me to protect you, and when the time comes, you can return the favor,"

Theodore didn't quite believe her offer and he still wasn't on board with her vision of terrifying people into accepting him but she had a point- until they could figure out a better way to handle things, it was better than the mountains

He finally nodded, accepting her hand when she offered it, even though he didn't really need it

And he stood, and she collected her sunglasses and his and put them back on before adjusting his flower crown and smiling at him, taking his finger and wrapping her hand around it as she pulled him down the street with her again

"Come, let's get ice cream,"

"OK," he nodded softly, following in her step and smiling peacefully as they walked

Theodore learned later after much trial and error with humanizing himself that it never actually mattered what form he took, for the human form- as beautiful as it was- came with its own set of problems

He had fallen into woe too many times after being confronted for his flower crown- after being screamed at and ranted at for wearing flowers in his hair all because of looking like a human male

The gentility that most people appreciated when he was a yeti was viewed as a weakness, an atrocity, and a scandal in his "tough" human form and though people always stared at he and Nicolette with confusion and slight fear when he was in his yeti form, it was worse when he was human, for in his human form, they stared at them in disgust and malice

"Humans are finicky creatures," Nicolette had explained one day as she painted his nails a nice lilac shade

"You can't please them no matter what you do, so you know what I do?"

Theodore brought his nails to his lips and blew on them to help the paint dry faster, shaking his head as he did so

"I stop trying, if someone tries to make me feel bad for anything- anything at all- I hold my head high and I keep walking, and I no, this sounds like such an easy thing to do and it isn't, it isn't, it never is, but it DOES get a little bit better if you at least TRY it, I promise you my sweet," she smiled, kissing his forehead and pulling him into a hug

Theodore thought that over, nodding against her shoulder and taking it to heart

From that day forward he and Nicolette went into town often

Sometimes it was in his human form, others in his yeti form, he had stopped really caring which form he took unless he knew the building

they were going to had a low ceiling and thus made being a yeti impossible at the time

It never seemed to matter if he was a yeti in a bookstore or a man at a coffee shop

If he was wearing a backpack as a yeti or lip gloss as a human male

No matter what the case was, he dealt with the fact that some people are just cruel

There is no excuse

There is no reason

It's just how they are

But whenever those people came too near, Nicolette was quick to shoot them down and shoo them off- at least, if Theodore doesn't do it first

Once upon a time

In a time long ago

There was a wolf who had a child- just one child and no one else

The wolf and her pup loved each other so much, more than anyone or anything else in the world

And they were all that each other had

But one day, the wolf died

It was sudden and unexpected and she left her cub all alone

The wolf wanted to move on to the afterlife like all spirits did, but she couldn't find it in herself to leave her cub

Her pup was so sad, so mournful, and cried so desperately, that the wolf found it impossible to move on

She simply couldn't leave her cub all alone in the world, but she didn't know what to do

She couldn't stay on earth, but she couldn't move on to Heaven either

And so she called out to the Goddess and asked her "Dear Goddess, how do I watch over my cub? How do I keep her safe and remind her that I'm still here with her? How can I look out for her when I can no longer touch her?"

And the Goddess replied

"Dearest wolf, you can protect her by watching over her from the skies and coming to talk to her in her dreams,"

The wolf was surprised, for she had never heard of such a thing, but the Goddess assured her that if she walked through the gates of Heaven, she

would be able to watch over her cub as if she never left

And so with great reluctance and anxiousness, she stepped through the gates

And to her surprise, the Goddess had been telling the truth

She could see her cub just as easily as ever

She sent her butterflies and pennies as gifts to assure her that even a world away, she was always the first thing on her mind

And slowly, the wolf began finding other people who were just as afraid of leaving their loved ones as she was

And she told them the same thing that the Goddess had told her

She taught them to talk to their beloveds in their dreams and one day, she became a Goddess herself in return for all of her hard work

Ever since, all of the wolves that pass on go to her the moment they step through the gate, and she personally shows them how to watch over their loved ones again

Wolves are so loyal and so loving that they cannot see this temptation and not follow through

And so all wolves watch over their families and packs, forever and ever, until all who they love are with them again

And wolves, being generous and kind, have imparted this knowledge on all other spirits who cross into Heaven as well

When someone wishes to see their loved ones again- and really, who wouldn't wish to see their loved ones again?- they find the wolves, and the wolves teach them how

As for the wolf's cub, she grew up into a fine and magnificent wolf herself and one day created a family all her own

Her mother still sent her butterflies and pennies throughout every year of her life and when the time came, she too passed through the gates of

Heaven and joined her mother in showing others how to watch over those they loved and protect them from the next world

And like her mother had for her, the cub sent her own daughter butterflies and pennies as gifts to show that she was thinking of her and watching over her even from another world

And so it became a tradition for all those who wish to show their loved ones that they're in their thoughts

So if you see pennies or butterflies in peculiar places, or one should happen to land on your finger or drop in front of your path, you should know that it is a gift from someone you love, someone you miss, just dropping in to remind you that they're thinking of you

Or maybe, it's the Mother Wolf, coming to assure a lost child that even if they're alone, she is there

She will love them as she did her own cub

For such a love is so unending, so everlasting, that it cannot fade with time or by mileage

It lasts so eternally, that it flows into everyone else around it

She would like to remind everyone that there is always someone with them, always someone to look out for them and watch over them

Even if they don't know who it is, even if they don't recognize the source

Or even if they truly have no connection of their own to the afterlife, she is there, and she will take them as her own and watch them as she did her own cub

Guiding them to the right path

Guiding them to the light

Just as, once upon a time, the Goddess had guided her

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This anthology is sure to delight any lover of fairytales, from the old to the modern, from the childhood simplicity, to the mature and complicated, dive into a world where true love is more than just a legend, where werewolves can save Christmas, and where you can find true friendship in the deepest of forests, these stories aren't just for children, they're for anyone who loves the world of fantasy!

Alexa- "Asagi"- Andres is a writer from Woodstock, Georgia who has been a writer in the making since she could speak and would dictate stories to her mother. Alexa has Sensory Processing Disorder and that has spurred on her General Anxiety Disorder, despite this she asks everyone to embrace their differences rather than condemn them. She owes her success to her astounding mother, as well as her extremely supportive grandmother and fellow fantasy writers. She also donates a portion of book proceeds to a charity that correlates with the theme of each book in order to help make the world a better place, no matter how small her hand is in it.

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